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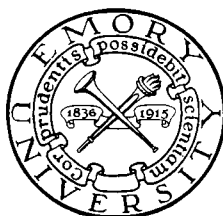
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OR,

THE VYVIANNES.

BY

J. MASTERMAN.

If thou do ill, the joy fades, not the pains ;
If well, the pain doth fade, the joy remains.

HERBERT.

NEW EDITION.

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A FATAL ERROR.

CHAPTER I.

A BONE OF CONTENTION.

Spireton in Dorsetshire, a small village on the coast of Purbeck, protected from the sea by a range of chalk hills. Population, 280. Contains a church and dissenting chapel. Lord of the Manor, Gabriel Lance Lance, Esq. Rector, Rev. John Craven. In the borough of Dulton, which is also the nearest market-town, four miles further inland.—See *Dorset Guide Book for 1810*.



FROM Dulton, the market-town, to Spireton, the small village by the sea, the carrier's cart was journeying according to its weekly custom, one damp evening in October of the year bearing the above date. The carrier was, figuratively and practically, a plodding man; as he paced along by his horse's head—for old Ginger's sight was failing, and the ruts were "terrible bad"—his energies seemed absorbed in moving loose stones out of his old servant's way, or in cheerfully encouraging him to "Hold up, eh!" Yet, notwithstanding his apparently exclusive attention to his horse's footsteps, his wits were full of other work, and his curiosity thoroughly roused on behalf of the solitary passenger sitting silent in the tilted cart behind him.

Concerning this passenger he knew nothing further than that she had been lifted into his cart by the mistress of the "Blue Lion" at Dulton, with injunctions to convey her to the "Methodee Parson's" at Spireton. He had vainly interrogated "Boots" and "Betty Chambermaid;" they could only inform him that she had arrived by the midday coach from Southampton, the guard of that conveyance having received her in charge from a black woman who was supposed to have just landed from "Injia." Boots added that the child must be Injia born, for she spoke "such mortal gibberish, that he and Betty couldn't make nothing noways of her." A very scanty all for the carrier's never very fertile imagination to work upon; but coupled with the little girl's pale face, strange dress, and unnatural quietude, more than sufficient to make him uncommonly anxious to know more.

"Who *can* she be?" he soliloquised, after another look back at the small upright figure so motionless in the shade of the tilt. Mr. Gittens didn't say ne'er a word about expecting e'er a body from foreign parts—he never said nothen about nobody from nowhere! He don't know no one in the Injees? But now I recollect, his sister ran off with a fine milingtary chap as went there." Rejoicing in this brilliant idea, he brought Ginger to a full stop, and went up to the cart, under pretence of lighting the lantern, but really to take another survey of his passenger. Just as before, the child sat immovable, her long dark eyes fixed and expressionless; even when he swung his lantern from the top of the arching tilt, and by way of opening the conversation inquired if she "didn't think that pretty?" she only shook her head mournfully without opening her lips.

"Well, I'm dashed!" was his inward comment, as he

scratched his head and returned to his former position. The evening closed in dull and gray, the road lay over a wide level heath, through narrow lanes, up zigzag hills, down stony declivities ; sometimes the wheels fell heavily into deep ruts, sometimes grazed against the protruding stone heaps ; but still the little form remained silent. The grassy banks on either side might heighten and cast a deeper shade over the solitary road ; the dark fir-trees branching overhead might creak and moan dismally, the night wind might roar with sudden fury right in the teeth of the travellers, threatening to overturn the frail vehicle, yet she sat uncomplaining and apparently unobservant.

At length the chill October blast caught the swinging lantern and hurled it from its hook ; then the carrier stopped his horse, and in the momentary lull of the noise of wheels and wind, the distant sound as of waves breaking upon a shingly shore came fitfully to their ears.

“ Oh, sahib ! are we near the big water ? ”

The silent spell was broken ; the carrier having picked up his lantern stared with surprise at the sudden change in the child's appearance ; her every feature was bright with excitement, as bending forward she endeavoured to penetrate the darkness. He secured his lamp to its hook, and watched her emotion by its quivering light for some seconds before he replied,

“ We be near the *sea*, if that's what you mean : why, that's where we be going.”

Then he climbed up into the driving-seat, determined to take advantage of the promising opening.

“ Do you know Mr. Gittens or his missus, Miss ? ”

A torrent of mingled English and Hindustanee answered him. Boots might well call it “ mortal gibberish.” The whip fell heavily on Ginger's sides, for his master felt anything but comfortable with such an

extraordinary companion. He was glad when he was obliged to stop and get down to put the "skid" on, before descending a hill.

"See," he said, making another effort at conversation, and pointing to some twinkling lights far down before them. "Yon's Spireton in the bottom there, and over them hills is the water."

The fresh wind blowing straight from the sea almost deprived the child of breath, and the carrier saw her bright eyes peer eagerly into the fathomless descent where the trembling lights appeared and disappeared as the wind drifted the fog through the valley, and then return disappointedly to their former sad vacancy.

They were upon a range of hills that forms a double barrier to this part of the coast—a range rich in treasures for antiquarians and geologists—a range whose veins are valuable marble, and whose base yields a scarcely less valuable material for the potteries of Staffordshire.

On the one hand lies a boundless expanse of purple heath, a map-like tract of far-stretching, undulating country ; on the other, the ground falls precipitately into a long, narrow, lovely valley, and then rises again with grassy slopes into a second terrace, against the chalky dexter side of which the sea beats restlessly for ever.

Between these hills, in a seclusion that could not be monotonous, lay the village of Spireton. Possibly it had been founded by the ancient Britons, certainly the Romans had rested there, and the Saxons had left there memorials within view in the shape of tumuli, or barrows, which crowned the cliffs like extinct infant volcanoes. Its present inhabitants knew little and cared less about its past history. Like most dwellers in favoured places, they were blind to its attractions, and wondered at the admiration of strangers. To them it was but an out-of-

the-way, dead-alive village, and they considered themselves fully authorised to grumble when the wind was high, when the air was cold, and the sun was hot, and when the dew lay thick on the slopes: defects were plainly visible to them; beauties they never thought of observing.

The carrier's cart wound carefully down the hill and entered the straggling village. Cottage doors opened, and voices inquired for parcels, but the carrier bade them wait his return, and stopped not until he reached the minister's house.

John Gittens dwelt under the same roof that had sheltered his honest forefathers for many generations. His grandfather had been the first to dissent from the Established Church, in consequence of hearing George Whitfield preach at Dorchester, and his piety had raised the "Methodee Chapel" in his native village, which had ever since divided local religious opinions. His father, by right of proprietorship and sound lungs, had occupied the pulpit for many years, and on his death John Gittens himself had been unanimously elected to the vacant place; so that none but Gittens' hands had thumped and belaboured the much enduring pulpit cushion, none but Gittens' voices thundered anathemas or promised heavenly blessings to the admiring worshippers at Spireton. In all its branches the family was highly respectable. In war and in peace, all its members managed to hold their own as well-to-do yeomen, never degenerating into small farmers shirking the audit-day, nor ever rising to the height of squires. At this time only two of the original stock remained in Spireton—a daughter married to a thriving farmer, and a son, the "Methodee parson" in question.

John Gittens' worthy helpmate, Hester Jane, sat opposite her husband at a little round table before the kitchen hearth. The long, and deeply lined face had no womanly softness, and her tall angular form scorned to take advantage of the straight-backed elbow chair on which she sat. That chair was, to a certain extent, very like her—it was angular, hard, wooden; no roundness softened its unpromising shape, no polish brightened its solid flanks. So with its occupier: she was hard within and without, unyielding, unbending; she dressed in stuffs that would brush and put away, and come out again like new—stuffs that like flock-paper set one's teeth on edge to touch; her very caps were trimmed with ribbon as nearly as possible the colour of dust, and her hair and eyebrows were thick iron gray. How such a woman came to be married was a problem her neighbours had never solved.

With all her hardness, she was not obstinate; unbending certainly, but only when she felt herself to be right. She was scrupulously truthful too, and though she would exact the utmost farthing from a debtor, she would also scorn to take an undue advantage on any occasion.

This evening Mrs. Gittens was evidently ill at ease; her long fingers tapped impatiently on the table, and her sunken eyes were fixed resolutely on her husband, who, fully aware of her gaze, yet tried to appear unconscious of it, and sat nervously clearing his throat at intervals, and smoothing a letter on his crossed legs.

The contents of this letter were the cause of the domestic uneasiness. It was of that thin blue paper, the sight of which, with its strange Indian postmarks, makes many an eye beam with eager, glad expectancy, and many a heart sink with anxious speculation; but this had brought unqualified dismay, though, as John Gittens fur-

tively re-read it, his eyes were full of half pleasurable tears.

At last, seeing that he would not speak, Mrs. Gittens exclaimed impatiently,—

“Well !”

“Ill” would have corresponded better with the angry impatience of her tone, but John—glad that the fascination of her silent look was removed, only said meekly,—

“I’ll read it again. Shall I, my dear ?”

“Don’t ‘my dear’ me. Read it again, if you have patience to go over such philandering stuff so often. There, go on with it, only you’d best not try to pronounce that redickerlous place atop of the sheet. I don’t believe there is such a place, unless it’s at Botany Bay, where he’s a deal likelier to be: there’s no such outlandish place in any Christian atlas to my knowledge, and I did ought to know, considering I learnt geography and the use of the globes at boarding school, one half. Now, John Gittens, do go on, and don’t sit gaping at me.”

“Well, well, but you should remember he made a lady of our poor Louisa !”

“A *nice* lady, indeed ! Made her ashamed of her own blood—made her break her father’s heart:—serve him right, though, for spoiling of her as a child—and now we are to keep the brat !”

John attempted no further expostulations, but began the unwelcome letter.

“DEAR SIR,—

“Since the death of your ever to be lamented sister, my little girl’s health has failed so much, owing to the unwholesome climate and the want of experienced female care, that I am at last most reluctantly obliged to take the advice of my medical man, and send her to

England. My poor Louisa, when dying, thought of this possibility, and made me promise, if such should be the case, to intrust her darling to the care of her maternal relatives—at least for the first few years. She died before hearing of your father's death, and the consequent break-up of your family circle ; but, of course, I wish to carry out her wishes as far as possible, and I feel sure of the co-operation of yourself and your excellent wife. My daughter will, I hope, reach you shortly after you receive this. I dare not keep her here until I have your answer : besides, I know you will not refuse the trust.

“ I have ordered my agents to send you half-yearly the sum of fifty pounds, which will, I hope, cover the expenses of her board and clothing ; when she is old enough to require tuition, further arrangements can be made : in the meantime, I am fully aware that no amount of money can compensate for the care and attention she will receive at your hands.

“ I know it is almost unnecessary to ask your utmost indulgence towards her, as you will be aware that a motherless Indian is slightly different in temper and manner to more fortunately circumstanced English-born children. I will only add in conclusion, that if I find her in time adorned with but half the virtues of her mother, I shall be satisfied.

“ With kind regards to Mrs. Gittens,

“ I am,

“ My dear Sir,

“ Very truly yours,

“ CONSTANT HERBERT VYVIANNE,

“ *Royal Staff Corps.*”

John wiped his eyes as he finished reading, and said sadly,—

"Poor Louey, it seems but a few months since she used to dance about this kitchen."

"So you've said three times already," cried his "excellent" wife; "but I'm not going to be humbugged by his flummery, and once more I tell you, I won't have a heap of spoilt brats running riot over my house. She may come, but she'll be packed off again directly, I can tell her: she won't get inside my doors, I warrant you. Let her go to some of her grand relations. Oh, he can be civil enough when it suits his purpose. I don't believe in her sickliness, not I: he's going to marry again, I reckon, and when he gets another lot of children, his fifty pounds will dwindle away and she'll be left on our hands altogether. Do you hear me, John Gittens?"

A most unnecessary question, for her voice was loud and shrill, and John was within arm's length; but he was evidently accustomed to such powerful eloquence, for he evinced no surprise as he quietly remarked—

"Well; but don't you hear it was little Louey's last wish that the poor baby should come to us, and——"

"Parcel o' rubbish!" she exclaimed, indignantly; "I know him better than that. Poor Louey, indeed! What business had she to steal away like a thief in the night from her father's house with a soldier fellow who was too fine to condescend to disgrace his family by marrying her publicly? She must have expected punishment, and she got it—in more ways than one, I make no doubt. Disgrace, indeed! I'd disgrace him! taking a girl out of her spear, and teaching her to shun her own people!"

"She's dead and buried now," interrupted John, "and she lies far enough from us all; let's forget and forgive: and recollect he did more than some of those grand officers and gentlemen would have done—he married

her directly she left us, and he let her send father a handsome present."

Mrs. Gittens smote the table in her righteous indignation, as she cried, in mingled sorrow and anger,—

"John Gittens ! minister of God's word ! where is your morals ? I am ashamed of you. You, a Methodee parson of the Church of England, and your father and grandfather before you, to talk in this loose way ! You're taken with his gold lace and heppelets as much as she was, poor, deluded creature ! But 'tis time you understood me, and I tell you plainly, I'm not going to be a charitable baby institution at my time of life."

John knew his wife's bark was a good deal worse than her bite, and generally he submitted to her little weaknesses placidly, knowing that she had his good at heart, and that her rectitude of purpose seldom led her far wrong. A warning cough from her in chapel could check the tide of his eloquence if it threatened to overreach the proper limits, and a meaning touch of her foot would shorten the lengthy grace with which, followed by a few choice hymns, he loved to invoke a blessing at love-feasts ; for she had a feminine regard for hot muffins, which were wont to grow cold as John grew warm. For once in his life, however, Mr. Gittens was so unmindful of his wife's anger that he continued the struggle manfully.

"How do you know she is a baby ?" he asked ; "she may be a strong, handy girl."

Here was a politic stroke, for Hester Jane had a horror of sickly children ; nervous headaches and languid movements excited her direst wrath. No illness was real to her unless it brought the sufferer to the verge of the grave ; and, even then, unless death followed, she considered herself to have been cheated out of her sympathy,

and regarded the patient ever after as deceitful and unworthy.

"Not she," she exclaimed ; "but, however, we'll say no more. *My* mind is made up."

"Ay," he said, "we'll sleep upon it ; maybe you'll hit on some good plan before morning."

A retort was on her lips, when the carrier's cart was heard to draw up to the little gate, and the carrier's voice inquiring for Mr. Gittens stopped the conjugal *tête-à-tête*.

Half an hour later, the contest—for the necessity of immediate decision had augmented the dispute into a downright quarrel—still ran high between husband and wife. The little object of this clamour sat in the back-ground among her boxes, in her travelling clothes, still in her attitude of silent misery, but no longer absorbed in her own thoughts. Young as she was, and almost ignorant of English, she understood enough by look and gesture to convince her she was no welcome guest. Forlorn and weary, she longed with intense longing for the dusky faces of her Indian attendants, or even for the cross ayah who had taken charge of her and several other little unfortunates during the voyage. Poor little Indian-born children, God help them, and God help those who must part with their treasures—their all that makes that far-off land homelike ; who must give up these darlings at the loveliest period of their lives to be trained by other hands, to imbibe the habits and principles of strangers, and to lavish their warm affections on hirelings. Wedded love need to be a holy, all-engrossing sentiment to qualify such sacrifices and heartburnings.

Constance and her little companions, who were, like her, travelling to seek new homes and friends, had built

many an airy castle concerning them, and, in their hopeful imaginations, had pictured them in glowing colours. How they had wearied of the restraint of ship-life, and promised themselves brilliant recompense when once the goal was reached ! How painfully the reality fell short of those bright idealities the solitary child now felt. For awhile, as she watched her angry relatives, surprise kept her from giving utterance to her sorrow ; but, as fatigue and hunger pressed upon her, as the warm room thawed her chilled heart, the sense of her utter helplessness overpowered all other considerations, and, yielding to her alarm and despair, she threw herself on the floor, and gave utterance to the passionate grief of a child.

The wailing cries, and the sight of the little figure prostrate and convulsed, moved John Gittens to forgetfulness of all beside ; he let his wife rail on unheeded, and, raising the child, took her in his arms, before the cheery fire, and, with homely, loving words, he strove to stop her agony. And Mrs. Gittens ! After all, she was a woman, and something in John's appearance as he so tenderly performed the part she ought to have eagerly claimed as her own, stopped her further invectives. In silence she noticed how the sobs gradually ceased and the pale face became aglow, until at last the little stranger raised herself in her uncle's arms, and, with the sudden devotion of her years, clasped his neck in a loving embrace. The expression that gilded John's plain features, and the softness that refined his harsh voice, spoke to his wife's heart in a manner she did not care to criticise ; for the present, at all events, she acknowledged herself defeated, and exclaimed, ungraciously enough,—

“Well, as she's tired, and it's getting late, she may stay till to-morrow.”

Next day she rose with the fierce determination to be

"quit of her" before night ; but the post brought a letter from Captain Vyvianne's agent, announcing that the sum of fifty pounds, which he was ordered to advance half-yearly, was ready to be paid to Mr. Gittens' credit in any banking house that gentleman would kindly name.

This was business : there was no shuffling here : no promissory note ; even if another fifty was tardy in arriving here was something in hand.

"She won't cost half that a year to keep," said John coaxingly, for his heart had readily adopted the orphan child of his youngest and favourite sister ; "and all that's over 'll be yours, my dear ; as it ought, for all your care and trouble."

Hester Jane was not proof against this bribe. She had brought a respectable dowry to her husband ; she wanted nothing, she hated having to spend a halfpenny even on her clothing, but the idea of a good balance in her name at Dulton bank was a bait not to be lightly rejected. She looked at the child, and finding her a well-grown girl of some ten years, concluded she must have cut all her teeth, and successfully gone through the measles, mumps, chicken-pox, white-mouth, and all the ailments possible and probable for childhood to suffer from. She looked at the well-filled trunks containing sufficient clothes for a life-time, and when she discovered a box addressed to herself full of wonderful preserves and pickles, she made few further objections, and Constance was installed as a member of the family—not as Constance though.

"Constance Sophia, indeed !" cried her aunt, when the child told her name. "Nonsense ! Stuffetta more likely ! your fine names may go down with your woolly-headed savages in your marble palaces and Indian elephants, but I won't have 'em here. Betsy was your

grandmother's, and Jane's one of my names, so if you must have two, you may have them."

And Betsy Jane, as she was henceforth called, learned, with many secret tears and childish vows of vengeance, to submit, at least outwardly, to this, and to all other of her aunt's decrees.

Mrs. Gittens' estimate of Captain Vyvianne was not altogether wrong. Eleven years ago, when on a visit to his guardian, Mr. Lance, the young ensign had been struck by the beauty of the old minister's daughter, and as he was on the eve of accompanying his regiment to India he thought a flirtation that must so soon terminate could do no harm to either of them, and therefore took every opportunity of meeting the young girl, careless of the wrong that might accrue to her fair fame.

Louisa Gittens had never listened to such sweet words in such grammatical language before, and received them into her innocent heart as the choice produce of a gallant, truthful mind ; she let the young ensign inveigle her into secret meetings, and while her whole soul was wrapped in a bliss that owed its ecstasy to her own imagination, thought not of the disgrace and sorrow that must follow deception. The old minister discovered (through some kind neighbour, no doubt) what was going on. Louisa was the child of his old age, the joy of his life ; but directly he knew of her deceit, his love turned to anger : her tears and prayers were unheeded, and according to the summary custom of his day, he locked her up in her chamber, believing that privation and solitude would soon eradicate the plague-spot of love.

But this proceeding occasioned the very reverse of what was intended. In the solitude of her room she brooded over and over upon the young man's vows and protestations ; she was almost mad with grief at the idea

of his leaving England without seeing her again. She pictured him seeking the place of rendezvous, fretting at her non-appearance, and believing her untrue ; and she persuaded herself that for *his* sake, she ought to see him just *once* more. So by some means or other she managed to let him know of her imprisonment, and, there being a traitor under the minister's roof, a stolen interview was managed. The romance of the meeting, the fear of its being interrupted by an angry father, and above all the imaginary persecution, brought matters to a crisis. Constant Vyvianne, looking into the sweet eyes full of love and grief, set prudence at defiance : he forgot his ambition, and his relations. At twenty-one he was too young to be vicious, but quite old enough to be selfish ; and he persuaded her to consent to a clandestine marriage, and to follow his fortunes. She thought him greater than an emperor, in raising her—an uneducated country girl—to his level, and in the brief delirium of the first days of her married life, she felt no regret for the homely pleasures and loving hearts she had so rashly bartered for the short-lived ardour of a boy's passion.

Within a fortnight after their marriage, they sailed for India. A nine months' voyage in an incommodious sailing vessel was a sore trial for connubial felicity. Before it was half over, he had felt the truth of the adage that says one can have too much of a good thing. He wearied of her perpetual smiles, of the sweet temper that was never ruffled, of the indecision that referred everything to him. Her feelings and amusements, innocent as they were, were totally different to his. She was intrinsically good, and under the tuition of a master-hand, would have become a splendid character ; but the master-hand was wanting.

In India, matters got rapidly worse ; she felt her de-

ficiency in education, and could not avoid contrasting herself with the graceful accomplished women amongst whom her husband's position placed her. Her sensitive nature magnified the annoyances her occasional breaches of etiquette caused to him. Unequal marriages never turn out well ; or if one in a hundred does, it is only that the exception may prove the rule : this was not an exception. The young wife had a child and was happy for a while ; but she had become aware that she had mistaken passion for love, fancy for fixed sentiment. The falseness of her position, and her constant dread of infringing the rules of society, all combined to undermine her health. She fell into a state of nervous weakness, and longed for the old father whose last look had been of anger—for the humble friends and for the quiet resting-place by her dead mother's side in the little chapel yard. But above all, she pined for one breath of the fresh sea air of her native cliffs, and craved for one moment's sight of the dewy meadows and lowly home of her happy childhood : the hot faint air from the punkah seemed to mock her longing, and she vainly pushed the damp ringlets from her aching brow to court the loved breeze that she had so little prized when it was at her command.

It was during one of these wretched, fevered moods that she had extorted a promise from her husband to allow their child to go to *her* relations in England, if it was advisable for her to leave India. He agreed ; because he knew his patrician aunts had not forgiven the match, and would certainly refuse to receive its offspring.

And the poor young mother died.

Captain Vyvianne gave his wife a splendid funeral and mourned, becomingly, her untimely death. He grieved sincerely at first, for he was not callous, merely selfish ; but gradually he began to think he was “ well out of it,”

and to wonder whether his rich relations would keep their anger now that its cause was in her grave. He began to discover, too, that his position as a young widower was very interesting, and to find relief in making the most of his bereavement. He could receive the adulation of the Calcutta belles, heart-whole himself, and while he openly asserted the romance of life to be over for ever with him, he secretly congratulated himself on being at five-and-twenty "eligible" again, and as such the centre of the tender regard of his marriageable female friends.

He had no sentimental love for his child: even at her birth he had evinced little interest for her; his first excuse was, that he feared to nurse her lest she should drop in pieces in his grasp, and when she grew out of babyhood, he was "obliged to restrain his delight in having her with him, being quite sure he should spoil her." Then when she was left motherless, she "recalled his lost one so forcibly, that it augmented his grief to look at her." So he contented himself with seeing her, generally, once a day; that is, when he took tiffin at home: then he would stuff her with sweetmeats, and, if any ladies were present, would let her sit upon his knee and fondle him. He was quite satisfied in knowing she was under the same roof with him, and never considered how her time was spent in running wild among the native servants, listening to their superstitions, and learning their tricks. It was not until she swore violently in Hindustanee one day before some of his brother officers, that he began seriously to consider what he was to do with her.

"Send her to England," was the general cry. And to England, as we know, she came.

His letter to Mr. Gittens was, in his opinion, a masterpiece; and he purposely planned his child's arrival to be

contemporary with it, so as to put it out of the worthy minister's power to make any objections. He was very careful also to place his "darling" in charge of an experienced ayah, and in company with children whose parents were known to him; and as he bade her good-bye on board ship, and took his seat in the return boat, holding a delicate white handkerchief to his eyes, he yet was able, in the midst of his acute sorrow, to wonder if his behaviour was properly observed and appreciated. His sleep that night was sweet; he felt he had done his duty as a father: henceforth, at least for the next ten years, he was at liberty to think only of himself—his *dearest*, truest friend.





CHAPTER II.

"HEIRS" AND GRACES.

JOHNN GITTENS' only remaining sister, Mrs. Levi (locally pronounced Levey) Frampton, heard of Constance's arrival with some vexation of spirit. She was older than her brother, and, having a large family, she considered herself the most proper person to take charge of her young sister's orphan : not from any great love for that young sister's memory, but because the handsome allowance would be such a help to her, "and John and his wife have a'ready more nor they do require." There was also a lurking fear lest John's savings should, in course of time, be diverted from her eldest hope, Roger, in favour of the stranger ; for she was well aware how intensely John had loved his bright young sister. These were her private feelings, which were carefully hidden when she visited the Gittenses, and made acquaintance with her niece. However, she could not forbear a little bitterness when she and Hester Jane were *tête-à-tête*, though she endeavoured to assume an unconcerned tone as she remarked that "surely the captain was very inconsiderate to impose such a task on a childless couple."

"No such thing," was her sister-in-law's snappish rejoinder ; "if we hadn't liked, we needn't have undertaken

the job. I've heard of some folks as are jealous of the trust reposed in me and John."

The visitor was silenced, for she held her brother's wife in some awe; nor was any love lost between the ladies, for Mrs. Gittens specially disliked "that noisy Frampton lot," and the intercourse of the two families never warmed into cordial familiarity.

Constance was not faultless, and she never overcame her first secret dislike to her uncle's wife, so that for some time after her settlement under that lady's roof, she led her aunt anything but a quiet life. By degrees, however, Mrs. Gittens' strong will asserted its supremacy over the little rebel, and she gradually learnt—as her uncle had done before her—that submission was the best policy. There were times, though, when the child's high temper spurned all control, and no punishment could bring a penitent tear, or word: tears of passion, and words of scorn—fortunately rendered unintelligible to her wrathful relation because couched in a jargon half English and half Hindustanee—came in abundance, and Mrs. Gittens, standing over her, despairingly declared her conviction that the child was "possessed."

For the first time in her life, Hester Jane was obliged to ask John's advice, and his interference had the desired effect. His grieved look, and constrained words, at once melted the obdurate spirit, and with her tear-stained face pressed against his breast, Constance sobbed out her contrition and affection. Mrs. Gittens did not know of this way of bringing the criminal to repentance, so she left the couple alone, sensibly sparing herself the mortification of seeing a person whose intellect she considered so much weaker than her own, obtain a victory for which she had struggled in vain. Neither did she know of the cakes and apples with which John stored his pockets at

Dulton, to be transferred to the child's ; but she did discover that the little girl was an excellent object to enable her to make John complaisant to her will, when he was inclined to be of a different opinion ; for to spare his favourite a cross word or a disagreeable task, he would endure the full torrent of his wife's wrath : by the same rule, kindness shown to the child rendered him pliable as wax.

Weak-minded, kindly John Gittens ! he regarded his little niece as a blessing sent from Heaven to share his scrapes and scoldings, and to enable him to bear them more patiently ; and his love was returned fourfold. The child soon understood that she had better forbear to express all her fondness before her aunt. Their happiest moments were those between services on Sunday. It was Mrs. Gittens' custom after dinner to retire in state to her prim unused parlour, where, with a hymn-book in her hand to make a show of duty, she nodded ; comfortably unconscious of the romps going on in the kitchen, and of her husband's habit of relating to Constance anecdotes of her mother's childhood.

Sitting on her uncle's knee when tired of play the little girl listened awestruck while John impressed upon her that every naughty act, and every petulant word, caused her dead mother a pang of sorrow and bitter tears ; and while Hester Jane firmly believed it was her own good example that was gradually changing the wilful child into an obedient tractable girl, it was, in reality, owing to John's simple, tender reasoning. It was, therefore, fortunate for Constance that the little dingy parlour was an interdicted paradise to her, and kept sacred for her aunt's state tea-parties, and the occasional visits of John's clerical brethren ; the mistress only indulging herself with a weekly rest within its precincts, more for the sake

of "keeping it aired" than for any real gratification its solitary grandeur afforded her.

The great folks of Spireton—the Lances of the Manor House—were, as has been already stated, the involuntary means of bringing about young Vyvianne's marriage. Mr. Lance had been co-guardian and trustee with the young man's maiden aunt, and—because it was while staying at the Manor the young people had become acquainted—the Misses Vyvianne chose to consider that if Mr. Lance had done his duty he could have entirely prevented the "very disgraceful *mésalliance*." It was in vain that Mr. Lance used quires of paper in assuring his old friends of his entire ignorance of the whole affair until too late; they replied that it was his business, as chief magistrate of the neighbourhood, to know all that was going on—that in a country place everyone *must* be, and *is*, aware of everything that happens around him, unless stone deaf, blind, or idiotical.

In this manner the acquaintance that had been kept sacred for years had been broken off, and all intercourse between the families was ended; for the same reason, all correspondence with the runaway bridegroom and his *ci-devant* guardian ceased. At first Mr. Lance was much chagrined at being mixed up in the affair; more especially since he was as proud a patrician as his incensed friends, and, from his proximity to Spireton, unavoidably brought into daily contact with the people who had occasioned the unhappy quarrel: he feared they would presume upon the connection, slight though it was, and was quite prepared to resent any liberty; but he discovered the pride of the old Methodist minister to be superior to his own.

Instead of considering his daughter honoured, Mr.

Gittens did not hesitate to declare her disgraced: "she had been made unfilial, deceitful, immodest; she had thrown herself into the arms of a stranger, in preference to those who had been true to her from her infancy; she had left her only remaining parent without one regret, though he had already reached the age allotted to man, and she could not reckon on ever seeing his face again; and had stolen away unmindful of his last blessing, and of his failing senses." Therefore he, and all his family, scorned to take any advantage of what was in their eyes shame and disgrace.

When Constance's arrival became known at the Manor, the recollection of all this annoyance had waxed faint in the lapse of years, and the consultation as to the propriety and desirability of noticing her was neither long nor stormy; briefly thus:

Mrs. Lance: "Anne tells me that Constant Vyvianne's child has come to the Gittens' "

Mr. Lance: "Perfectly ridiculous! Vyvianne has too much sense to keep up that connection."

Nelly: "It is quite true, papa, I saw her on the cliffs yesterday. A queer little animal as to her dress, but with a bright intelligent face. Of course she's nothing to us."

Mr. Lance: "Why of course? I should not like to pass anyone of the name of Vyvianne coldly by."

Mrs. Lance: "Besides, if Gabriel meets her father in India, it would not do to say he never noticed her. Don't you think I'd better go down to Mr. Gittens and hear all about her? Poor little thing! I pity her!"

Nelly: "So do I, after all! Wretched infant! fancy being left to the tender mercies of that female Gittens; she'll have to wait for the life hereafter, to find any. I can fancy the child having her face washed with

a scrubbing brush, and being fed on perpetual cold pork."

Gabriel: "Really, Nelly, you express yourself very coarsely; I positively feel my eyes full of soap and bristles. I agree with Mrs. Lance, we had better show our best side on this occasion: it would be awkward if I met Vyvianne in India, don't you see! eh?"

Nelly: "No, I don't see, but I understand; though your grammar would puzzle Lindley Murray," and with a satirical courtesy to her handsome brother, the young lady danced out of the room.

The Squire of Spireton had been twice married: by his first wife he had four children, his present wife had no family. The Manor of Spireton was what may be termed "a very snug property," and, in conjunction with a larger and richer estate in Yorkshire, was sufficient to provide the owner with all the comforts, and most of the luxuries, of life. Mr. Lance was what ladies describe as a "lovable man;" he had nearly broken his heart when his first wife died, but her dearest friend comforted him in his sadness, and in time was induced to fill the vacant place.

I don't speak scoffingly, nor wish to infer that because a man can love and be happy a second time, his former love was a delusion. Our spirits are too buoyant to sink under the first adverse wave that covers them. How few, except in antiquated romances, die of a broken heart!

Men die, and worms eat them, but not for love.

What a wretched dyspeptic set of creatures we should be, if we lay down despairingly at the first gust of trial's tempest! Because a man rises up again after some over-

powering bereavement, and smiles, and interests himself once more in the affairs of the world, people say, "Oh ! he's all right again ; we need not trouble ourselves about him ; he won't die this time." Though had the object of these remarks taken to his bed, or secluded himself from his fellows, the same tongues would have declared him to be "a poor mean-spirited, weak-minded creature, a sinful murmurer against the decrees of Providence ;" so impossible is it to convince lookers on that regret and tender sorrow live longest under a calm exterior. In nearly every heart there is a depth we dare not disturb, a chord ever vibrating, a picture that must not be unveiled, a recollection that obtrudes at all hours and seasons, a fountain of bitterness ever ready to overflow and overwhelm our souls with agony.

Maybe a dull aching void within us when we are appearing only careless and happy, which by indulging for a moment will make the present and the future, as far as regards this world, wearisome and hopeless. And while we are expressing unmitigated satisfaction, there may remain a mental reservation, a craving sadness for the bright "might have been," had our idols and our hopes not failed us. Many an Edwin, while pressing the soft lips of her whom he calls his dearest Emma, is thinking of the brighter lips withering in the grave, or smiling upon another, and the charms of his new love draw him closer because of some fancied resemblance to the last. Luckily neither can penetrate the other's innermost feelings, or Edwin might start back aghast at the bitterness corroding under Emma's beaming looks, and drawing her back to the sweeter past.

It was Mr. Lance's nature to take life as it came and be thankful, consequently he had fewer trials than fall to the lot of most men. The wife of his youth and the

mother of his children was very dear to him, and when she died he really believed he should never be happy again ; but two years afterwards he found his heart was drawn towards the lady who had been the dearest friend of the dead, who had soothed her last moments, and comforted her sobbing orphans, who had the same tastes and pursuits, and who from long acquaintance knew well the wishes and habits of the squire. He did not pretend to make an effort for his poor children's sake, but honestly confessed that he courted her for his own sake, and because he believed she could restore his lost happiness. The world said, "Lance knows what he's about : his first wife had a large fortune which he is to enjoy till his daughters marry ; the second is still richer ; it's to be hoped he'll get her to make her will in his favour." But the world was wrong, as it sometimes is.

His family consisted of Helen, Gabriel, Bertha, and Bolton : a handsome lively set ; rather too lively as far as the heir was concerned, for though only just twenty-one, he had managed, by the aid of Jews and other complaisant money-lenders, so effectually to embarrass and entangle his affairs as to cause serious inconvenience to his father.

Mr. Lance was not of the right stuff to govern unruly children ; he knew his son was leading a very gay life at college and a still gayer one when in London, but he was too indolent, and too willing to believe the best, to inquire far enough into the young man's habits. But when, on Gabriel's coming of age, the truth was unpleasantly forced into his notice, the squire roused himself. He thoroughly investigated every particular, he had every iota of liability put before him in plain figures, and with a spirit which even his most intimate friends had not sup-

posed him to possess, he drew up the following stipulations for his son's consideration :—

Namely,—Every debt, including those falsely called "debts of honour," should be paid to the uttermost farthing, if Gabriel would solemnly determine never to bet again, and would at once choose a profession to keep him from the sins generated by idleness.

In vain Gabriel urged, "Where was the use of a fellow following a profession when he is an heir, don't you see?" His father was obstinate, and replied by another question: "Why should a man live in idle dependence, merely because he will have a competency some day? And, added the squire, "you won't have anything like a competency if you go on as you have begun; for there will be nothing left."

The son was so astonished at the father's firmness, that he at last began to acknowledge its wisdom and to regret his own conduct. While feeling this, he applied for a commission in the army, and soon found himself gazetted as cornet in H.M.'s regiment, under sailing orders for Calcutta. Then the sisters protested against "Papa's hardness on poor Gay," and Mrs. Lance privately begged her husband to consider before he allowed his eldest son to become an exile; but the father remained deaf to the entreaties of his woman-kind. He alone knew how deep a drain his boy's extravagance had drawn upon his purse, and he also had the remembrance of his own youthful career having once tended to a like serious involvement, had it not been stopped in time by a judicious parent.

So Gabriel was to go, and in the quiet of the country the young man was learning to rejoice at this sudden stop to his wild folly, and—with the elasticity of youth—was looking forward to new scenes and new pleasures

in India. Few words passed between the father and son; it was not Mr. Lance's nature to express his feelings, and a stranger looking at Gabriel would wonder how one apparently so placid and thoughtful could ever have participated in vice and folly. The reason was this, simply because he was too quiescent to resist temptation; because it was too much trouble to excuse himself from joining his wild acquaintances; for though he had no enjoyment in doing wrong, he was too diffident to originate any better mode of spending his time. Had he been lured towards the right road, he would have done his best to follow it. A faithful friend, a father who would have gently led the feverish inquietude of youth to spend itself on what was interesting to the mind, without being shorn too bare for the fleeting, feathery fancies of boyhood to work upon, might have made a useful man of him; but alas! Mr. Lance preferred his turnips, his sheep, and his library, and thinking Gabriel must take his chance like others, he only bestirred himself to act for him when it was well-nigh too late.

From a like reserve, Gabriel passed the last few weeks of his life at home without giving utterance to his regret for the past and good intentions for the future. His chief amusement was to smoke, and walk slowly up and down the broad terrace walk that ran round three sides of the house. Mr. Lance from his library window would observe his son's dilatory movements; would notice the slight, nerveless figure, the fair boyish face, the lack-lustre expression of the wide open blue eyes, and the listless motion of the long, white hands; and as he watched would mutter, "How the deuce did such a fellow make up his mind to spend his money so fast? He looks as if he lacked the sense of an idiot." While

Gabriel, as he caught sight of his father sitting unoccupied at his writing table, pitied the "poor old fellow's tame existence," and, "hoped *he* never should sink into such mere vegetation."

The old housekeeper looking out from her "still-room," would call old John and ask him, "if he ever see such a moral image of the squire as Master Gabriel was growing," and the two elderly servants who still spoke of Mr. Lance as "the young squire" would comment upon the wonderful resemblance between the two, in the upright saunter, the vacant stare, and even in the hat far back on the fair head.

Oh! could some pow'r the giftie gie us,
To see ourselves as others see us!

Mrs. Lance's investigations concerning Constance Vyvianne resulted in having the child to spend a day at the Manor. She made her appearance in an extraordinary garment of Mrs. Gittens' fashioning out of an Indian shawl, and as the good lady had not thought it necessary to consider anything but economy, the large, pine patterns and wonderful designs were pieced together regardless of harmony. Nelly laughed outright, and Gabriel let his cigar die out, in amazement at the little figure thus arrayed; but the object herself never considered that she was affording them their amusement, and soon made herself at home. She had recovered from the fatigue and chagrin of her journey, had already accommodated her speech to untravelled ears, and had none of the awkwardness of a country-bred child. Gabriel took her fancy at once; he reminded her of the indolent, easy-going men she was accustomed to see about her own home; and the idea of his speedy departure for India, where he would probably see her father and her old friends, riveted her regard.

“Captain Sahib,” she cried, as she perseveringly dogged his footsteps, “will you kiss old Sue for me? you’ll find her in the verandah at the left-hand corner of the compound.”

“I won’t promise the embrace,” he answered, “unless she’s very pretty.”

“Well, she’s not white, she’s the colour of Aunt Framp-ton’s big pig; but she’s not a pig, you know, but a dear old thing, and she used to make ghee for me. You will kiss her, won’t you?”

The brevet-captain was slightly embarrassed by the affection thus liberally bestowed on him. Luckily, the conversation did not require much assistance, beyond his usual exclamations of “Yes, yes.” “Oh, ah!” “I see,” &c., which, judiciously put forth, quite satisfied the little girl of his attention, and she declined Nelly’s friendly overtures and offers of cake and pictures; continuing to skip by his side, relating anecdotes of her “pretty papa, who is something like you, captain,” and of her old life, with a volubility and animation that would have scared Mrs. Gittens, and which brought Mr. Lance from the fireside to share in Gabriel’s and Nelly’s amusement.

“You’ll go and see if mamma is still in the big garden, where the stones grow?” she said, as Mr. Lance joined them. “Old Sue says the stones are put there to keep the ghosts down. There are Gilaries* in the mango topes in that garden, but, indeed, you must not try to catch one, or Vishnu will be angry. Aunt John says mamma is not in that garden now; but Sue must know best: don’t you think so?”

Gabriel pushed his hat still further off, and looked so bewildered as to what he ought to reply, that his step-mother answered for him.

* A kind of small squirrel.

"Your aunt is right," she said. "Your mother is in heaven now, singing to God beyond the blue sky : if you are good, you'll join her there some day."

"I'm very sorry," said the little girl, sadly.

"Sorry," cried Nelly, "that your mother is in heaven?"

"Yes ; for mamma is *not* happy if she is there. Aunt John says chapel is just like heaven, and I know mamma would not like the heat and the smell of peppermint—I don't. I think Sue knows best, for she is nearer mamma ; and you don't know India. I shouldn't like chapel all day and all night, should you, captain?"

Gabriel stroked his chin, and tried to think of something to say, for she had taken his hand, and was eagerly waiting for his opinion ; but the subject was not in his line, and he could only stammer out,

"Ah ! don't you see? Ah, well ! you'll understand by-and-by. I'll send you word, don't you see, when I've asked old Sue."

She dropped his hand and sighed ; she felt unanswered and unsatisfied. He lighted a fresh cigar, and, as it happened to be a remarkably good one, it soothed his disturbed equanimity and enabled him to continue gaily,—

"The best thing is for you to return to India when I go."

"Ah !" she cried joyfully, "that would be nice. Couldn't I go in your big box, and pretend to be your nightgowns?"

"Rum little devil !" was his mental remark. Then, to change the subject, he asked, "Do you learn any lessons?"

"Yes," and her face clouded over, "I sit on a high stool without a back, and I read the dictionary to aunt Gittens, and learn to write ; but I don't like it."

"Then I wouldn't do it."

"Ah! you don't know her. She would give you suet pudding and salt for a week, if you didn't obey her."

Her originality and warm impulsive feelings rendered her a speedy favourite at the Manor, and as the Gittenses were proud to have her seen by the villagers walking with Miss Lance, and found reflected glory in telling their neighbours, "the child is at the great house as usual," or, "Miss Lance can't do nothing without our Betsy Jane," scarcely a day passed that the little girl did not spend part of it with her father's old friends.

The only sympathetic feeling between the aunt and niece was their mutual dislike to the young Framptons. Constance's acquaintance with them never ripened into friendship; she having, like a true-born Indian, an intuitive perception of good breeding. She despised them for their wrangling amongst themselves, their riotous conduct, and their broad speech. On their part, they resented her superiority of position, both as the daughter of an officer, and because they imagined she was usurping their right in regard to John Gittens' money; but when she became intimate with the two great families, the Lances and Cravens, envy was augmented by malice.

Roger Frampton, the eldest son, was the most objectionable of all his objectionable brothers and sisters. He was a tall, broad-shouldered, red-haired youth, well up in all the slang and cheap literature of the day; a self-conceited, presumptuous, half-educated snob: but, in the opinion of himself and his parents, a well-read man of the world, far above his compeers, and destined to be "somebody" one of these days.

At fourteen, he was the bully of his school, and the torment of his acquaintances. Four years later, his worst qualities were varnished over by the egotism of dawning

manhood, which made him anxious to screen his vices, but not to eradicate them. With all his brute-like qualities, he was not devoid of a certain ambition ; though it fell far short of that pure zeal which can overlook pain, sorrow, and self, and surmounting all difficulties go on untiringly, unflinchingly, brightening as it goes, till it attains the wished for goal. And, though this highest order of earthly ambition is still unsatisfying, even at fruition—for the summit of every earthly pinnacle is disappointing and barren—yet it occasions a purification of all lower desires and sensual feelings, leading the mind above petty trials ; sometimes, though too rarely, even to that all satisfying goal, where the prize is a crown of pure gold, and the end everlasting life.

Therefore, perhaps, ambition in Roger's case is a misnomer, as in him it turned solely on self-aggrandisement—a mere vulgar longing to be above his relations—in his ideas, a gentleman ; his definition of that much misapplied term being to be rich and powerful, to live in idleness, to have obsequious friends. He had sufficient knowledge to discover and make fun of his father's ignorance of grammar, but not enough to render him tolerant of that want, nor mindful of the many atoning virtues. He was ashamed of his mother's want of breeding, and of her deferential courtesy, and "Sir," and "Marm," when addressing her superiors—the inmates of the Manor and the Hall—with whom "that brat, Betsy Jane," took all sorts of liberties unchecked.

His first interview with "that brat" began the lifelong feud which was destined to exist between the cousins. He was then fresh home from school, his education being considered complete ; and, in high spirits at the emancipation, was amusing himself with teasing his sisters, and annoying his father's labourers. Some unprovoked rude-

ness of his roused Constance's anger ; she called him "an overgrown schoolboy," and "wished her papa was near to give him the whipping he so richly deserved."

"Your pa wouldn't mind your wishes, Miss," was his reply. "He's got rid of you, he has, and don't want to see you again. You'll have to be a governess, my dear."

In her anger, she raised her hand and struck him, as she had often struck her Indian attendants ; but Roger did not take the indignity so tamely as they ; he seized her in his strong arms and straightway deposited her, kicking and screaming, in the pigstye ; his revenge showing great penetration, for her nose always took an upward curve when in the neighbourhood of the farmyard, in which unsavoury place the altercation happened. He little thought that the humiliation he so carelessly heaped upon her was productive of undying scorn and hatred.

Having exhausted the capabilities of home to afford him amusement, he began to long to commence the career that was to bring him distinction and enjoyment. After much deliberation, he decided in his own mind that college would be the best stepping-stone ; there he could make grand friends ; there he could obtain a smattering of the habits of that "superior-society"—superior in his ideas, because its members could afford to live in idleness—which would qualify him to rise above his clownish connections. But to achieve this desire, he had first to coax his mother to the same opinion, and then to induce her to recommend his father to lay out the necessary money.

Honest Farmer Frampton opened his eyes wide at such a request, and wondered "what more our Roger could want to know, when he had been six years at the classical and commercial 'cemetery' at Dorchester?" And it required many assurances of his son's having a

mind above sheep, and a spirit intolerant of "turmut's," to induce him to consent to spend his hard-earned savings in such an uncalled-for manner.

His consent was obtained, however; much to Mrs. Gittens' disgust, who emphatically assured her nephew that his proper place was at the "plough's tail," adding, "You'll soon come home again to t' plough, like that old heathen Betsy Jane read of the other day. Only the old heathen got some good by his leaving it, which you never will."

Which grim irony was all the blessing he obtained from his affectionate aunt.

"I've no patience with you, Martha," she exclaimed, when she and her sister-in-law were discussing, in raised voices, this plan of Roger's. "What should you raise him out of his proper station for? Them girls think more of the *piany* and fallals than they do of their parents. *Piany*, indeed! I'd *piany* 'em."

"And I should like to know," retorted Mrs. Frampton, "why my children are to be debased, and Louisa's girl set up. How will you answer that, Hester Jane?"

It was a melancholy fact that Mrs. Gittens was but mortal; she loved to vaunt of Constance's intimacy with those whom the villagers regarded with a reverential admiration that was the growth of generations of vassalage; and in her secret heart, notwithstanding her repeated declarations to Constance that she was not nearly so fortunately born as her despised cousins, she rejoiced that the child did not "pick up with them and their lot;" and though she always spoke, and appeared to think, sneeringly of Louisa's "milingtary husband," yet she was really fully aware that the importance of the Gittens' family amongst the neighbours was immeasurably increased in consequence of that marriage.

When Gabriel went to India, he entered into a solemn engagement with his little admirer to make her his wife on his return. She cried bitterly at parting, and tried to induce him to let her go in a hamper.

"They'll think I'm chickens," she urged; "I'll crow whenever anyone comes near. I've learnt to imitate them so well—only try me!"

Even the arrival of the youngest son, Bolton the midshipman, who got a few days' leave of absence to bid his brother good-bye, did not distract her genuine sorrow; for though he was nearer her own age, she would not fraternise with him, owing to some words of his respecting herself that she overheard at their first meeting; these were:—

"I say, Nelly, who's that odd-looking child that seems running tame amongst you all?"

"Constant Vyvianne's daughter."

"What! the little Methodist, whose mother ran away? I remember Vyvianne; he was a jolly fellow, and used to come and play with us in the nursery. I've a faint recollection, too, of a great shindy in the house, and when I asked why the soldier had gone away, they made me hold my tongue—tyrants!"

Constance heard this, and did not attempt to hide the anger occasioned by that plain speaking. She went up to the sailor and exclaimed—

"My mamma did not run away, Sir! She is in the ground. Boys should not talk of what they cannot understand."

A hearty laugh of amusement did not lessen the vexation he had already caused her, and she rejected all his friendly overtures; boy-like, he delighted in raising her wrath by professing to believe he had usurped Gabriel's place in her regard.

"Good-bye," he cried, when he was leaving home, "if you grow up good-looking, perhaps I'll marry you some day when I've nothing better to do."

She tossed her head disdainfully, crying,

"I should be sorry to marry a younger brother," and turned away with an air partly borrowed from her pattern of perfection, Miss Nelly, and partly copied from the heroines of the high-flown novels she read aloud for Miss Lance's edification.

Bolton noticed the affectation, and said to his sister, "Take care, Nelly, or she'll become a caricature of your worst points."

In course of time young Lance and Captain Vyvianne met in Bengal, and struck up an intimate acquaintance on the strength of the ancient friendship between their families.

Henceforth Gabriel's letters teemed with admiring mention of his new friend's suavity of manner, of his dashing appearance, of his prominent position on the Governor-General's staff, of his knowledge of the world, and of his kindness in initiating him into the mysteries of Indian life and cautioning him against the many gins and traps spread out for inexperienced Englishmen; but, above all, the young man specially commented upon his style of dress, as if that were the most important point of all. In conclusion he added,

"In fact, my dear father, Vyvianne, notwithstanding the many calls upon his time and attention, contrives to fulfil the part of a true friend and adviser to me, so if I go wrong here it will be entirely my own fault; knowing all this, you will not need to be asked to show his child as much kindness as you can."

All this panegyric was received as Gospel by Mr. Lance, who, kneeling in the little church in the quiet valley,

thanked God for raising up a sincere friend to comfort and guide his prodigal son in a strange land.

By Nelly, who did not estimate her brother's veracity quite so highly, his remarks were received with greater caution, and in her next letter she begged "dear Gay" to remember that, as there was nothing to be got by gammoning her, he might just as well write naturally to her, for he might be sure no one but herself should be any the wiser. Accordingly the correspondence between the young people was carried on without so much regard to secondary considerations.

Miss Helen Lance was by nature a born flirt ; admiration from the other sex was as necessary to her as meat and clothing ; but while she never scrupled to indulge her propensity, she always contrived to avoid pushing it beyond that faint boundary line which divides that delicate badinage of wit and sentiment summed up under the word flirtation, from the broader and less refined coquetry which leads more certainly to imprudence and disappointment, and, not unfrequently, shame.

Hitherto she had escaped all censure even when she held the young rector in her toils, as well as many another ; for being prudent, *i.e.*, selfish, as all flirts are, she conducted her love affairs (Cupid forgive the misapplication of that word !) so that no foolish attachment on her part—the man's feelings were of no consequence—might prevent the grand *dénouement* when the right suitor, in the shape of a rich, handsome, and, if possible, titled personage, should appear. Ardent admirers by the dozen were allowable, and many would gladly become declared lovers : but as yet none had possessed sufficient golden charms, and she had managed to retain their admiration while preventing the disagreeables of having to refuse closer connections.

In the hunting field she took every yeoman's heart by storm. The squire appeared by her side “merely to take a peep at the hounds” he declared, but directly the “view halloo” sounded he forgot his good intention of respecting his wife's loving cautions, and rode madly forward, while Nelly, perfectly at home in the saddle, and perfectly conscious of the admiring eyes upon her, followed close to her father. Neither hedge nor ditch opposed her course, and many a broad chest heaved a sigh of dismay and relief, at sight of her light figure sitting firm and gracefully, while her horse bounded high beneath her, and alighted safely on the other side of some nasty double-ditched hedge; and many a coarse voice cried out in her praise, and many an eye shone approval upon her pluck, that in calmer moments would not have dared to open their lips in her presence, or meet her apparently unconscious glance.

Notwithstanding all this adulation, time rolled on without bringing the husband *par excellence*, and when her younger sister Bertha emerged from the school-room, and became her companion at the parties, Miss Nelly began to think it was necessary for her to keep a more earnest look out for this eligible partner that was so tardy in coming; especially as Bertha's appearance was calculated to act as anything rather than a foil. Being a prudent young woman, even contingencies were not neglected, and after seeing a portrait of Captain Vyvianne, and hearing of his increasing good fortune in India, in addition to his expectations from his rich unmarried aunts, she decided that it would be as well to create an interest for herself in him, in case he should return to England in search of a wife, and find her still unmated.

Of course she considered the latter well-nigh impossible: the “title and the settlements” would be hers long

before he came back ; but at all events it was just as well to "do the civil " to Gabriel's dashing friend. She calculated pretty accurately that her lively letters to her brother would be shared by his friend, and the idea sharpened her wit. In course of time witty remarks and brilliant sentiments appeared in Gabriel's "private despatches," prefaced by "Vyvianne says I am to tell you," or, "Vyvianne thinks this is in your style," until it became an understood thing for the captain to send long messages to the young lady he had known as a child ; nor was Miss Nelly behindhand. Constance was a capital excuse for this paper flirtation ; it was so natural to remark, "Constance and I have just returned from a long walk," or, "Constance is always talking about her 'pretty papa.'"

Certainly Constance *was* continually with her, but the kindness was not so entirely disinterested as would seem. Miss Lance was often joined by gentlemen in her long walks, and a third person was necessary to disarm Mrs. Grundy. Constance was a convenient shield against scandal, for what could the most malignant tongue say when the two young ladies sauntering over the cliffs chanced to meet a male friend, who preferred their society to a solitary ramble?





CHAPTER III.

A STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION.

BERTHA LANCE was a very different person to her sister, and after her emancipation from her lessons the difference soon showed itself. She entered her sister's room one morning when Nelly was reclining on her sofa, lazily listening while Constance read aloud. Bertha had purposely planned her visit at a time when the little girl was supposed to be studying under Miss Helen's superintendence; but Mrs. Gittens would have shuddered could she have guessed these studies to consist of the most sentimental love stories and improbable romances. Bertha had an idea of the true state of the case, and in the same spirit which prompted the knights of old to achieve the rescue of some distressed damsel who had got into some impossible scrape, she now prepared to put a stop to these very unprofitable studies.

On her entrance, Nelly raised her hand, and Constance ceased to read.

Bertha not appearing to notice the gesture, said,—

“Oh! don't let me interrupt you. What are you reading?”

“The ‘Sorrows of a Lonely Heart,’” said Constance, unconsciously, “and oh, it is so lovely!”

Bertha burst out laughing.

"The 'Sorrows of a Lonely Heart!'" she repeated; "how can you read such trash? Nelly, how can you let her fill her head with such nonsense?"

"My dear child," said Nelly, with an assumption of the superiority of an elder sister, "you are fresh from Mrs. Markham and Gibbon, but you did not always find them delectable. Go back to your music, my dear, and leave us to amuse ourselves as we please; when she goes to school she'll have dry reading enough."

Bertha took no notice of her sister's hint, but turning to Constance, asked her age.

"Nearly fourteen," was the reply.

"Who teaches you, or have you finished your education?" was the next inquiry, just as abruptly put.

The child took this question in good part; she had sense enough to admire her questioner, so she said,—

"Uncle John has written to ask papa about a school, and until his answer arrived, Nelly said I might study with her."

Bertha, standing erect in her virtuous indignation, remarked,—

"Very kind of Nelly, I'm sure! Her permission must be an incalculable benefit to you. When did Prussia become a kingdom?"

Constance, looking up at the calm, questioning eyes, became aware of the young lady's sarcasm; she longed to refute the suspicion of her total ignorance by at once answering correctly, but the truth was, she had never heard of Prussia being a recently formed kingdom. She could gain no sign of information from Nelly, for Bertha stood between them, and so was compelled to remain in blushing silence.

"Hem! who fought the battle of Agincourt?"

Still no answer.

“Where is Botany Bay?”

The blushes deepened, and the eyelashes were moist. Bertha took compassion, and her voice softened in the next question.

“Do you believe in second love?”

The reply came now, readily enough.

“No! there can be but one true, deep——”

Bertha could not restrain her laughter, and Nelly screamed with amusement; once more the child became silent.

“Go on,” cried Bertha, “I’m so edified. Nelly, I congratulate you on having so apt a pupil. History and all such like nonsense is very uninteresting, compared to such a book as ‘The Sorrows of a Lonely Heart.’”

“Be quiet,” said Nelly, “keep your excitement for the Cravens’ ball to-night!” And Bertha left them; but not before she had kissed Constance, and mentally resolved to rescue her from this hurtful occupation.

At the ball at the Hall that evening, the younger sister crossed the elder’s path yet more decidedly. Helen looked on with the eyes of experience while the men gathered round the fair young *débutante*, exerting themselves to obtain a glance of approval from the pale, sweet countenance that betrayed no shy flutter at the evident admiration this her first appearance in public excited.

It was rather hard for one who had been hitherto victorious, and reigned absolute over these fickle beaux, to watch them bending before another shrine: she, the toast of county dinners—she, whose speeches went the round of an applauding neighbourhood—whose very impertinences were declared piquant, and who could take liberties with the most formal with impunity, to see her

young sister set up in her place ! But Nelly was not of a despairing nature ; there was one pang of jealousy, one sudden twinge of conviction that Bertie's charms were younger and fresher than hers, and then she triumphed over the momentary weakness. Bertha might have superior beauty, but Bertha lacked one thing that her sister possessed in no ordinary degree—the desire of pleasing everyone. Even to gain hearts, Bertha would not condescend to laugh and jest with all comers, and to talk as freely and merrily with new friends as with old. So, like a skilful angler, Nelly was content to await a reaction ; and her patience was rewarded.

She had been the acknowledged belle and wit of the neighbourhood too long for her popularity to be overturned at once : old associations could not so easily be set aside. The merry, ringing laugh disclosing the white, even teeth behind the rosy lips, was still irresistible ; the innocent look accompanying the somewhat impudent speech was still fascinating ; for her assumed innocence as she uttered these impertinences baffled and prevented her partners in the ball-room from taking advantage of her words, while her feminine manner of pursuing the masculine tastes of rowing and hard riding gained her the hearts of the country gentlemen, who might otherwise have been scandalised by such habits in a lady. Her somewhat perilous position was, therefore, yet secure, and before the end of the evening she was again in the position she loved—the centre of a fascinated group.

She sat out one dance for the express purpose of talking to the young rector, who, where he was a stranger, would dance till daylight, affirming, in excuse, that dancing was an exercise specially attached to the sacred ceremonies of old, but who, in his father's house, thought fit to keep such opinions to himself, and enacted the part

of a decorous parish parson. She was anxious to hear his opinion of her sister, and he was not backward in obliging her.

"I had no idea she would make such a beautiful woman," he exclaimed, as his eyes followed Bertha's graceful movements.

"Do you think her beautiful?" said Nelly, twirling her fan. "She is too much like Gabriel!"

"She has his large eyes, but the expression of hers is dreamy, not strong; she has a calm dignity, too, so very fascinating with that soft, girlish face; and her figure is perfection."

All young ladies rising twenty-six must admit that a large amount of unselfishness is required to admit of gracious attention to such a panegyric uttered by one's own appropriated admirer on the charms of another, even if that other is one's dear sister. Nelly had told herself over and over again that she might have been "the Reverend Mrs. John Craven" any time within the last five or six years, and with perfect truth; for her great difficulty had been to keep him her slave without allowing him to presume on the final question, or compromising her own feelings; while he, unconscious of being classed amongst the young lady's contingencies, was, as she intended, only withheld from speaking out from the fear of being too precipitate, and believing hopefully that all would be right eventually, was almost content to wait her good pleasure.

She was *not* pleased, yet she smiled up in his face, and exclaimed, quite naturally,—

"I am so glad you think so, John: of course *I* consider her perfection; but sisters cannot be impartial judges of each other. She is so good, too! I wish I could be as unselfish as she!"

The accompanying sigh, and the artless glance straight into the honest hazel eyes, smote right to the young man's heart, and he blamed himself for the momentary devotion he had—though only in thought—paid to Bertha. What was youth and beauty in comparison with Nelly's tried friendship? Surely there was beauty enough in Nelly's radiant eyes and glossy ringlets, and what was the dignity he had declared so alluring, compared with Nelly's sunny smiles? Again, the *éclaircissement* that had so often trembled on his lips, was very near utterance; but she cleverly checked its progress. There was something better in perspective, in the shape of a cousin of her step-mother's, who was coming to stay at the Manor, and whose attributes—young, rich, handsome, and titled—corresponded with the ideal husband for whom she had so long waited. With a sweet, downcast, blushing smile, she, therefore, ended the *tête-à-tête* by rising and joining the dancers.

Going home, while Mrs. Lance slept in a corner of the carriage, Helen said to Bertha—for the eldest sister had been cogitating the desirability of providing a subject for the affections of the younger *before* the advent of the expected guest—

“What do you say to becoming Mrs. Johnny Craven? He has the family living, and is the eldest son, remember!”

Bertha, somewhat flushed with the flattery that had been so liberally bestowed upon her, coolly replied,—

“Thank you, but I won't deprive you of him. I am always expecting to hear he has proposed, and you are engaged.”

“Absurd!” said Nelly, somewhat nettled at this unsatisfactory view. “I dare say he would have no objection, though; but I don't feel good enough to be a

parson's wife : the mere idea of the Sunday-school atmosphere stops my ardour. Poor Johnny !” And then she stopped, half afraid that, in her desire to let Bertha know she need not sigh in vain, she had spoilt the little scheme she had planned for an unopposed triumph over the expected guest.

The next morning Constance was at the Manor early, to hear of the ball. Nelly, who was gardening in the manner peculiar to young ladies—pulling up choice slips instead of weeds, breaking off delicate blossoms with her sleeves, and humming favourite airs the while—greeted her with affection. Bertha, who was reading the newspaper within hearing distance, only looked up and nodded, and Constance never thought of running up to her, as she did to Helen. Her early admiration for the elder sister remained in all its strength ; to be grown up, and wear curls and flounces, was still her great ambition : in fact, if a king had come to invite Miss Lance to be his queen without delay after the delightful custom of fairyland, the child would scarcely have felt surprise, so all the young lady's anecdotes of the sweet speeches and devoted attention with which she had met the preceding night, were listened to by her faithful little ally, with deep interest and belief.

When Nelly had exhausted her memory and imagination, she condescended to be interested in inferior matters, by asking how Constance had managed to be there so early ?

“Oh,” was the answer, “Aunt Gittens is quite content to be able to say to Aunt Frampton or Miss Smith, ‘The child is at the Manor ; they can't do noways without her.’”

The manner in which she imitated her aunt's dialect

provoked Nelly's laughter, which belied her reproving "For shame!" Then she inquired,—

"Is the talented Roger at home, now?"

"No, but he is to leave Oxford this term; is it not absurd for him to be at college?"

"It is very praiseworthy of him wishing to improve himself," cried Bertha's clear voice; "it shows he has a sensible mind."

She knew nothing whatever of his character, but, mindful of her determination to benefit Constance, wished to begin the reformation at once. So she called her to her side, and read aloud the account of Buonaparte's being a prisoner on the *Bellerophon*, now off Plymouth.

"Oh! I am glad," exclaimed Nelly, triumphantly. "Serve him right, he has come to perfidious Albion in rather different style to that he intended."

Bertha was more generous.

"Oh, Helen!" she cried; "think how he must be suffering! Such a man to be brought so low!"

"He's reduced thousands much lower," persisted Nelly; "besides, only think, now there will be peace, and we shall have all the men home again. Hurrah for peace and plenty of fresh partners! Hurrah for the Peninsular heroes! Let us persuade papa to take us to London. Oh! how glorious! why did you not tell me sooner?"

"I've only just got the paper; if you'd breakfasted down stairs you would have heard papa's letters. But I'm sure we shall not go to town, for there is the Dulton election coming on, and Bolton will get leave now; besides, you forget Lord Charles is coming: it is not likely we shall leave home at present."

"Oh, well!" cried Nelly, who possessed the good quality of quickly accommodating herself to circum-

stances; "the election is sure to give us some excitement, and if Lord Charles is worth anything, we may manage to enjoy ourselves down here: only I must tell you one thing; you leave me to set my cap at Charles Bolton, and I'll not interfere between you and Johnny."

She spoke laughingly; there is a little adage about truth being often spoken in jest.

"Thank you again for nothing," said Bertha, disdainfully; "but recollect it takes two to make a matrimonial one: both Johnny and Charles Bolton may prefer to choose for themselves; but either way, they are perfectly safe from any designs of mine. I should be ashamed to appropriate men as you do; there is not one that I ever met with worth a new ribbon. Please to attend to your own affairs for the future. I can afford to wait for some years to come."

Nelly laughed, not in the least abashed by this plain speaking.

"Come, child," she said; "let us have a little study to calm our excited spirits."

Bertha put down her paper.

"Oh, Nelly!" she exclaimed, rather nervously for such a brave young person; "if you like, I will give her lessons every day, till we hear her father's wishes?"

Nelly turned sharply round, and looked from her sister to Constance; the surprise on the latter's face convinced her there was no understanding or preconcerted scheme between them.

"Just as you like," she said, indifferently; "certainly you have more time than I: but what do you say, child?"

"She ought to be glad to get on, at her age," cried Bertha; "at least if she has any sense."

But Constance, wondering what this proposal meant,

and half afraid of her ignorance being made more public, remained silent before the sisters; fearing to offend either, by giving words to her thoughts.

Nelly came to the rescue, saying,—

“Of course, she *will* be very glad; you can have her from ten till twelve if you like, and she can spend the afternoon with me as usual. You will soon become a miracle of erudition, child.”

So the new plan began, and prospered. Bertha's taste became a labour of love instead of duty, while the pupil quickly learnt to prize the sterling qualities of her graceful teacher. Under her tuition, the mind which had so long lain dormant—flexible and comprehensive as it naturally was—gained strength and substance daily; her unalloyed admiration for Nelly's fascinations became tempered as her mental powers expanded, and enabled her to see below the surface, and as her regard for Bertha heightened, so did her tastes for the frivolities that occupied Helen, lessen.





CHAPTER IV

PREPARING FOR ACTION.

DULTON was a borough town, that in forcible language would be denominated *rotten*, numbering scarcely four hundred constituents; and its obscurity of position and stagnation did not preclude it from being a bone of contention at every new election. For the last eight years it had enjoyed rest, but now when a dissolution of Parliament threatened, every voter pricked up his sleepy ears, and, forgetful of the anxieties and vexations of former contests, started up fresh and eager for action.

The Lords on the inland side, and the Lances on the coast manors, had for generations pretty equally divided the glory of representing the little town. In those days—the early part of the present century—bank-note presents to wives and daughters, and low-rent bribes, were not regarded in the obnoxious light of to-day. A threat or a promise was not considered high pressure, and a handsome present was held to be merely a gentlemanly, delicate attention.

In the two last elections there had been no contest, for Mr. Lance had been too much occupied in his private affairs—too busy in nursing his weakened property to be able to hold meaningless audits, or to scatter bank-notes

with a liberal hand. Colonel Llord had, in consequence, walked over the course unmolested. Since then, however, the squire had recovered lost ground : he had let his estate in Yorkshire advantageously ; his farmers, selling their corn at war prices, paid their rents duly, and again he could hold up his head, an unfettered landowner. Still he would now have refrained from striving against his neighbour at the forthcoming election, had not the colonel vauntingly declared at a public dinner, that he felt himself secure in his seat ; this so effectually roused the squire's dormant ambition, as to determine him to show fight once more, and almost before the news of the dissolution reached Dorsetshire, the fight between the squires was raging high.

Henceforth there was an end of all peace and civility in Dulton. Dearest friends treated each other as mortal enemies ; the wives of the rival lawyers espoused their husbands' politics (have lawyers politics, or do they merely regard them as parts of a retainer?) with the acrimonious zeal without which few women can be earnestly interested. The cosy tea-parties, and rubbers of long whist, were now impracticable, because former partners were at daggers-drawn. Banners of factions began to be fabricated in innocent nurseries and school-rooms, bitter words flowed as plentifully as strong beer, and beneath all ran a deep vein of bribery, cajolery, and deception.

"Ah !" cried Mrs. Gittens, when Farmer Frampton came in on his return from Dulton market, and told her of the ferment existing in the once quiet town, "I'd be ashamed to make such a fuss about such nonsense. I should ha' thought a man could sleep more comfortably on his own feather-bed than in one o' them chairs in the Parliament house ; or if they must have a few letters after

their names, why, the colonel might put A.S.S. : nobody would want to deprive him of 'em, and it would suit he a deal best."

"Well, it is queer," said Mr. Frampton, "for men like they to kick up such a commotion ; for I've heard that neither of 'em ever speechify when they get there, and neither of 'em have e'er a son to push into Government places. The colonel came into the market-room to-day, and I think he makes too sure, for he never shook hands with any of us, but growled at the tobacco-smoke, and then went off to have his brandy in a private room, while the squire came in free-like, sat himself down, and had his glass amongst us ; and yet *he* hadn't much to say for himself."

Mr. Lance talked the like subject over with his family after dinner, and gave his opinion quite as candidly. He said,—

"As far as intellects go, Llord and I are pretty equal."

There was a dutiful chorus from his daughters of "Oh, no ! papa," and from his wife an indignant denial.

"Well !" he continued, smiling, "at all events, he has more substantial power than I can boast of, and, remember, he has thousands where I have only hundreds."

"Our colours are the prettiest," cried Nelly, who took a strictly feminine view of the matter. "You will put the servants in sky-blue, papa, to outshine the colonel's pink liveries ?"

"I can't say : pray don't meddle with politics ; women should be content with making up bows and streamers. I should not like to see anyone of my name making herself so conspicuous as that ridiculous Miss Frampton at Dulton."

"Miss Frampton ! Oh ! do tell us what she has done !"

"She's the plague of my existence. I believe she neither eats nor sleeps. Go when I will, morning, noon, or night, there is that woman—rain or fair, it makes no difference—with a pink sash, pink spencer, pink hat, pink everything. She seems in everyone's house, nursing all the babies, flattering all the silly women, buying everything indiscriminately. She had the impudence to offer me a rose to-day, and asked me to admire the lovely pink tint over the heath. She will be the death of me!"

"She's positively made you talkative," said his wife, laughing: "I never heard you say so much before. She's good-looking, is she not? I shall really come and look after you sometimes."

"I don't see much beauty," he rejoined; "one and the other worry my life out. I am beginning to think I was an old fool to come forward."

"Why don't you give your interest to some lord who can stand the worry? doesn't Lord Spireton know of anyone? Really I should not like Colonel Llord to be victorious, after all!"

"That is the only reason I have for going on; but your idea is not bad: I'll think about it."

Next market-day he returned home thoroughly tired and wet through: he sat down exhausted in his wife's dressing-room, crying despairingly,

"I cannot stand this any longer: for four hours I have been shaking hands with warm farmers, in an atmosphere reeking with tobacco, onions, and brandy."

"Why do you? Really, the prize is not worth it."

"I must, if I want to win. Llord likes the drink, though he won't do the shaking hands. I have been thinking as I drove home, whether Charles Bolton would do instead of me. Suppose I write up to Spireton, and get him to sound the —— club?"

The result was, the arrival of "a safe man" from the — club, with Lord Charles Bolton, who had agreed to fight Colonel Llord to the death ; and the constituents were apprised of the squire's withdrawal in his favour, by an address which appeared on the town pump, and other public buildings, stating, that as Mr. Lance found his health would not allow him to avail himself of their kind and liberal support, "he begged to resign his interest in favour of a younger and worthier candidate whom he would soon introduce to them, and whom he could confidently recommend as in every way calculated to do honour to the worthy electors of the Borough of Dulton. Not only had his ancestors for many centuries past toiled in the senate, and bled in the field, for their country, but he himself had already risked his life to spare his beloved countrymen from the horrors of foreign invasion, and, in ability and experience, he bade fair to rival the fame of his noble forefathers. He was, in fact, exactly qualified to fulfil the onerous duties of the high position he trusted by their assistance to obtain, and would prove himself an illustration of that rare embodiment "the right man in the right place."

All this was repeated with variations and additions by Mr. Lance himself, when he went to Dulton to meet the young man in question, and introduced him to the wondering townspeople.

An empty hay waggon, drawn up in front of the principal inn in the centre of the town where the four streets met, was the forum from which he harangued the people. It was evening, the work of the day was over, and the idlers were well pleased to lounge about and hear themselves addressed as gentlemen, and to fancy they possessed the power of patronising or rejecting a real live nobleman.

Mr. Lance, standing forward and receiving occasional whispered hints from the parliamentary agent at his elbow, delivered an elegant eulogium upon the past exploits of "his noble friend," whose youthful brow was already crowned with well-earned laurels by a grateful country; "who had gone through the worst part of the recent devastating war, who had suffered tedious imprisonment in a foreign land, and had spurned proffered liberty because it would have been purchased at the cost of his religion!" Then the squire inquired how that weary imprisonment had been spent? And receiving no answer (as indeed was an impossibility), he proceeded to inform his hearers, "Not in idle repining, not in vain attempts to elude his jailor's vigilance; he scorned the one as rebelling against an overruling Providence, the other as dishonourable! No; he actually improved that wretched period by studying! Not dead languages, they were already as familiar to him as his mother tongue! Not the tactics of military science, he had served a long apprenticeship to them! Not in the study of fabulous history! No, his healthy patriotic zeal led him another way, and because he is a man of the present enlightened age! above all because he is an Englishman, a man of Dorset—he spent those solitary hours in studying how best he might serve the interests of his countrymen, and by making himself thoroughly acquainted with the legislature of his native land; he formed plans and improvements by which he fondly hoped to make that legislature more beneficial to that noble race—the working men of England—in whom he has ever felt the deepest interest, and for whom he has suffered pain, want, and captivity, and is willing to suffer even death."

Great sensation amongst the listening crowd, which showed itself in vociferous hurrahs when the squire was

silent, and in renewed undivided attention when Lord Charles took the foremost position, and, with an air of modest hesitation, prepared to speak. The crowd had gradually augmented till the cross-roads were covered with listeners of all grades. One by one servant-maids had stolen out in their neat white aprons, and befrilled caps, every window round was filled, and even the opposition ladies left their tea-tables and advanced many paces beyond their thresholds to catch the sense of the clear voice now addressing the throng.

The young soldier wore his uniform, according to the custom of the day, which did not allow of tweed suits and Jim Crow hats, even during leave of absence. The setting sun glittered on the gold lace and epaulettes, the sword, and the orders that decorated his breast. His tall, lithe figure, well-toned voice, sparkling eyes, and uncovered curling hair had their full effect. His words were few and simple, merely expressive of the hope that the "gentlemen" before him would do him "the great honour of electing him to be the representative of their ancient and most interesting borough; in which event his appreciation of their kindness would be visible in the untiring care with which he should watch over their interests and strive to merit their regard."

So many considerations and personal attractions were irresistible, and at the conclusion of his speech, the shouts that rang from the crowd were quite as hearty as those which had greeted Colonel Llord's exordium a few hours previously; one of the charming characteristics of the mob being a delightful variableness of opinion.

The loud applause prevented the noise of approaching wheels being audible, and few among the crowd noticed a postchaise advancing up the street until it had stopped outside the throng, and its occupant had jumped out,

lightly forced his way through, and scrambled into the waggon.

In a moment, Mr. Lance recognised the intruder as his sailor son, and forgetting all but his delight at the unexpected arrival, he clasped him joyfully in his arms.

The young sailor seeing the enthusiasm around, and wild with delight at his return, embraced his father, and then poising himself on the outer railing of the waggon, waved his straw hat above him, and indulged in a shrill and prolonged cheer—whether in self-gratulation, or as a necessary tribute to the prevailing excitement, does not appear.

The blue eyes literally dancing with glee, the sunburnt, happy countenance, the agile, well-grown figure, in his sailor's dress, and the careless grace with which he kept his elevated and somewhat insecure position, fairly carried the assembly away from political feelings. He was well known in his native place, and "It's Master Bolton" resounded on all sides, followed by cheer upon cheer. It was no longer a question of "Pinks and Blues," all went mad by infection, and even Miss Frampton made no attempt to silence the boyish hurrahs of her brothers as they joined in the general acclamation.

The soldier and the sailor, standing on either side of the beaming squire, formed a tableau to be pleasantly remembered; the background of gray old houses set off their youth and manly beauty, and the golden glow of a glorious sunset bathed all in radiance. Had the good folks possessed three boroughs, they would have eagerly flung them before the trio, so entire was the momentary devotion they inspired: but, as Miss Frampton said,

"Let 'em scream themselves hoarse; shouts aint votes, and it isn't polling-day."

The still adoring crowd escorted the squire's carriage some distance out of the town, as if unwilling to lose the objects of their admiration, and Bolton kept it amused by shouting forth fabulous anecdotes of Lord Charles's prowess in the Peninsula, until sheer lack of breath on both sides compelled the one to keep silence, and the other gradually to be left behind.

"My dear boy," said Mr. Lance, as the last applause came faintly from the far distance, "pray compose yourself; you'll break a blood-vessel if you go on in that boisterous way."

"Mr. Bolton behaved with great judgment, Sir," interposed the "safe man;" "the proceedings of this evening were extremely favourable. My dear lord, are you sure you kissed all the females at the 'Lion?'"

"If he didn't, I did," said Bolton, quietly; "and they really took it in very good part: didn't seem to dislike it either."

"What a wild country," said Lord Charles, as they entered the long road over the heath.

"Ah!" cried the squire, "wait till we get over that range of hills, you'll find softness enough then. I believe this furze land, with its rugged heaps of fresh-turned clay-soil, generally strikes strangers as desolate and devoid of beauty; but when you see more of it, you will find a peculiar charm in this wide waste of heather-land, that, unlike a cultivated view, becomes more fascinating the oftener you look at it: at least I find it so."

"So do I," cried Bolton. "Hurrah for the wilds of Purbeck! Shady lanes and wooded vales give me the blue-devils; but this open wilderness, bristling with amber 'fuz,'—that's the right pronunciation—this broken, irreclaimable land, this limitless view, with the fresh wind

rioting from the sea, raises my spirits to Olympus. I say, Lord Charles, you are welcome to note these remarks. Shall I lend you my pencil?"

Considering this was their first meeting, Bolton's manner might be considered rather free and easy; and his new friend wondered if the young ladies partook of the like style, for, as he would be domesticated for some time with them, he was naturally curious about them.

After toiling up the steep hill that formed the inner barrier of Spireton Valley, the carriage stopped to give the horses time to regain their breath, and Mr. Lance took the opportunity to point with some pride to the scene before them.

Approaching night had already enwrapped the bottom of the valley in obscurity, but the Manor House, which was situated on the slope of the cliff facing the west, stood high enough to be yet distinctly visible, and its peaked roofs, gilded vanes, and many gables, were yet rosy and bright in the glow from the western sky. It stood sideway to a little sheltered bay, amidst lawns and climbing plantations—a fair type of those old country houses which render English scenery so peculiarly pleasing. The sea stretching beyond lay in purple twilight, motionless under the darkening canopy of heaven. The quiet loveliness of the view fell on the wanderers' hearts with soothing pleasure; with the peace Nature brings, and which is the only sensation earth gives us akin to that of holiness.

Lord Charles's admiration quite satisfied the squire, and Bolton's emotion found vent in an emphatic "Hurrah!" that caused old John on the coach-box to nudge his fellow-servant, and declare under his breath,—

"Master Bolton's a rum 'un, and no mistake."

There was a large dinner-party that evening in honour

of the new candidate, and the guests were already arriving when Mr. Lance and his companions reached home ; he, therefore, at once showed them to their rooms : but Bolton scampered off to his step-mother's dressing-room to announce his unexpected arrival, and from thence to his sisters'. He found Miss Nelly leaning over the banisters to get a glimpse of Lord Charles as he passed through the hall beneath, while Bertha was quietly standing at her window holding up her book to catch the last rays of daylight.

Bolton saw in a moment that his eldest sister was dressed for conquest, and that the youngest, whom he had left in the school-room, had become an uncommonly beautiful woman.

"I say, Nelly," he exclaimed, after going through the necessary amount of ejaculations and embracings, "he's the finest specimen you ever saw. 'Sudden Death' is his name in ball-rooms, I can tell you : but you needn't ruin yourself in gauze and ribbons, or kill yourself with tight lacing, for he's booked already by a French princess, who used to sing under his prison window. Don't look so scornful, Bertie : just ask him to show you the stuffed frog he wears on his manly bosom, out of compliment to her nation."

"You know nothing about him, so don't pretend," said Nelly, on whom the idea of a previous engagement (though she knew the French lady to be a mythical personage) fell unpleasantly. "Reserve your romantic yarns for solitary amusement when you are mastheaded. You never saw him before to-day, Sir !"

"Never you mind that ; we travelled men of the world have a freemasonry among us that enables us intuitively to divine each other's antecedents. I only give you a kindly warning. How's Johnny Craven, Nelly ? havent

you caught him yet? Well, I'll lend you a helping hand. Really, you are two nice-looking girls." And he vanished.

"Dear old fellow," exclaimed Bertha admiringly, "I am so glad he's come."

"Yes," said Helen, "but we must not encourage his mess-room remarks."

When the young ladies entered the drawing-room, they found all the guests were assembled, and their progress up the long room was a series of greetings; but while Nelly appeared to bestow her exclusive attention on each person she stopped to parley with, she was fully aware of the group of gentlemen standing at the further end—after the manner of men in the subdued interval before dinner—in the centre of whom was Lord Charles.

That young man had, on first entering, scanned all the ladies, to discover which were the daughters of the house, and, not having found them, had mentally set them down as Goths, for not being ready beside their mother to receive their visitors. When they at last arrived, however, he at once changed his mind: there was no want of good breeding in their movements, as they smilingly advanced. But alas! for Nelly's sanguine intentions, his eyes, after resting on her for a moment, turned to her sister, and there remained fascinated. Composed and stately, with but the reflection of a smile on her small sweet mouth, and no roving glances darting from her serene eyes, Bertha walked up to her stepmother, and stationed herself at her side.

There was no bashful droop of the stately young head, no flush on the soft rounded cheek, no visible embarrassment in finding herself amongst so many people as she thus placed herself; it was but the natural impulse, gracefully obeyed, that led her to seek the person most familiar to her. She could then, resting her hand on Mrs. Lance's

chair, gaze composedly around her ; and a mysterious thrill passed through Lord Charles as he encountered the glance of her cloudless blue eyes.

It took a longer time for Miss Nelly, with her liberal dispensation of smiles and pretty speeches, to reach the end of the room ; but she managed at last—of course unconsciously—to approach the group of politicians. Mr. Lance, who was one of them, introduced Lord Charles, and she favoured him with one of those killing acknowledgments that generally proved so destructive to the receiver's peace of mind.

“ Now you must make the acquaintance of my youngest daughter,” said the squire, moving towards his wife ; “ and then you will know us all.”

Lord Charles followed him by no means reluctantly, and bowed low in reply to the swimming courtesy with which it was then the fashion for ladies to receive new acquaintances ; but he did not shine in so doing, never having felt so sheepish and awkward since his dancing-lesson days, when it was his painful duty to execute a *pas-seul* before three giggling girls, in full view of criticising friends and ireful instructors. In fact, he nearly backed into a collection of Chelsea china, the pride of Mrs. Lance's heart ; but Nelly came to the rescue, and that enterprising young person soon brought him to his senses again : indeed, she took such care of him, that he could only occasionally even glance towards her sister all through dinner.

But Nelly's pains were useless : the mischief was really done.

The gentlemen sat long over their wine. When politics are on the tapis, ladies must submit to be of secondary consideration. Lord Charles began to feel the first disagreeables of being public property ; for whereas formerly

he might have followed his inclination and slipped off to the drawing-room, he was now compelled to sit and listen to the pros and cons, and held close prisoner by an irascible old gentleman who choked over his wine, and d—d “those rascally Whigs,” holding the young man by the button-hole the while, little thinking that the thoughts of the seemingly patient listener were of a very different subject.

Presently Bolton, who managed to look after his own and everyone else's affairs, seeing his friend's abstraction, reached across the table, and, removing the fragments of a dish of almonds and raisins from before him, exclaimed, *sotto voce*,—

“I say, my dear fellow, if you walk into sweetmeats at that rate you'll not survive to be an M.P.”





CHAPTER V.

PINK AND BLUE.

NOW that Mr. Lance needed no longer to canvass on his own account, it was astonishing how he enjoyed accompanying the young men : he was never bored by long-winded farmers, never fatigued by wet rides ; every difficulty became smooth, and he withdrew his verdict against the interference of his women-kind : who successfully rivalled Miss Frampton by buying useless things in Dulton, admiring the most bloated and uninteresting babies, and, by their good nature and good looks, winning many a wavering voter to their cause.

The very hoofs of the horses seemed to ring pleasantly over the paved streets of the little town as the young ladies, accompanied by Lord Charles and Bolton on horseback, drove rapidly up to the head-quarters of the Committee at the Lion ; even the envious "Pinks" admired the pretty phaeton, and the skill with which Miss Nelly handled her white reins ; nor could they refrain from returning the pleasant greeting which the merry party distributed impartially to Whig and Tory.

It was quite a gay time for Dulton, and notwithstanding the feuds, both sides enjoyed the bustle ; they were relieved at having something to talk of beside Mrs. So-and-So's last new dress, or Mr. Dash's endeavour to eclipse his neighbours.

"Here is the colonel," cried Nelly, one day as they were walking up Dulton Street. "I'll stop him; he and I are great friends."

"Then we'll be off," said Bolton.

"No, no," Lord Charles said; "I want to see him and to hear how he talks. He swears awfully, doesn't he?"

"I should think he does; he is a martyr to neuralgia, and whenever he feels a twinge, out comes a tremendous oath: don't laugh, and we will introduce you."

Colonel Llord was in all respects a remarkable man. He stood upwards of six feet high; his figure was spare and bent; his features—all save his eyes, which were very small and deep-set—were large and strongly marked; he dressed in the style which had been the fashion of his youth, when he had been a celebrated dandy, and, to judge from their shabbiness, his clothes had been made in that remote period. His boots were, however, faultless.

His salutation, as Miss Lance deliberately placed herself in his way, and held out her hand, was strongly spiced with oaths, which need not be repeated.

"Why, it's Miss Nelly, surrounded by beaux as usual, eh! So you are plotting against me, eh! trying to throw me over. Can't you leave a poor old fellow in peace? Your eyes will play the devil with the poor wretches of voters, eh! Oh! confound this beastly pain!"

His harsh voice became absolutely horrible as he uttered the last observation; his hand sought the little knob of hard wood which he always wore fastened in the back of his coat collar, and which, pressed upon the quivering nerve, procured a counter-acting sensation, while he stamped in agony, rolled his eyes, and uttered a string of the most blasphemous interjections.

The paroxysm lasted but a moment, and his acquaint-

ances, being accustomed to such outbreaks, remained silent until it ceased ; only Lord Charles whispered an inquiry if he was in his right mind.

“ On every point but this, I suspect,” answered Bolton, turning away and pretending to point to some distant object, “ he’s right enough. His servants are devoted to him ; which is a pretty good test of a man’s disposition : and yet I have seen him hurl a stool at his valet in a rage, and the next moment he was just as likely to throw a sovereign after it to make amends.”

Nelly continued her bantering conversation, as though it had never been interrupted.

“ There’s not a chance for you,” she said. “ You should not have given up the hounds ; you’ve been losing caste ever since. No one in the country can afford to get themselves up as you did in your pink coats, white satin breeches, and white kid gloves. The king once asked me—it was at my first drawing-room—if I had seen you in the field. I said yes, and that I was your ardent admirer ; but I shall give you up now you have become stingy.”

Greatly pleased with this speech, the colonel chuckled blandly, and said,—

“ Ah ! can’t afford those fooleries now, I’m half ruined by these d—d elections, eh ! Is that young pup—I mean fellow—my rival, eh ? Introduce him.”

Lord Charles was presented to him, and after measuring him from head to foot, the colonel solemnly informed him, that he wasn’t half such a fine fellow as his grandfather, who was an ally of his forty years ago, and that it was useless for him to waste his time and money over the Dulton constituents. “ Better employ yourself in playing cricket with that young scamp,” he added, pointing at Bolton ; “ it will harden your biceps, and not spoil

your temper, as this losing game of politics will ; or else ask Miss Nelly here to teach you *her* favourite game—it begins with an f—eh, Miss Nelly ? F stands for fool as well as flirting though, don't it ? Ah ! go off home, children, go off home." And thus the interview terminated.

"An amiable and estimable character," observed Bolton ; "he'll never believe himself beaten till the last moment, obstinate old brute. Remind me to show you his likeness at the Lion ; it was taken in his youth, with three embroidered waistcoats, and no end of ruffles and jewellery : he thinks himself still handsome and captivating, but he was a leering dissipated-looking fellow. I can tell you a few queer stories concerning him."

"Don't talk scandal, Sir," said Bertie. "Look ! there is your friend Silly Joe."

"So there is. Come, Charley, let's attack him : he's good for two."

"What, that filthy miserable object ?"

"That costume is peculiar to his profession, which is the respectable one of rag-gatherer. He's the greatest liar and rogue in Christendom ; but he gets paid out at elections : the agents know he can't be depended upon, so he never gets a moment's peace till he's really entered his vote. Come along ; he's worth trying for. Good-bye, girls, go and kiss some dirty babies ; we'll turn up again 'somewhere.'"

And the two young men followed their victim.

That same afternoon the colonel was persuaded to pay a conciliatory visit to the rag-gatherer's wife ; but when they reached Mrs. Joe's dirty hovel, they found the enemy in possession, and evidently installed as friends, for a select tea-drinking was going on with great decorum.

The apartment was, to more senses than one, significant of the owner's calling. Rags replaced the window panes, stuffed up holes in the mouldering floor festooned the decaying rafters, and formed a fanciful covering for the heap which the vagrant couple termed a bed. Torn black bags were piled up in a corner, and a pyramid of bones, which looked strangely human, served as a sort of sideboard for the lady's plate and china.

Bolton Lance was seated on a prostrate sack of bones, in an attitude denoting insecurity and distaste; only the idea of relating the adventure at home, with illustrations and additions, enabled him to carry it bravely out. He held a dilapidated shaving tin full of a dirty unctuous-looking liquid which the hostess called tea. Lord Charles was honoured with the only cup the establishment boasted; his seat was a wheelbarrow turned upside down, and upon which Mrs. Joe had considerably placed her pillow—an act of kindness not at all appreciated. The legal attendant had ventured to decline any refreshment, it not being absolutely necessary for him to attempt to swallow such abomination. He, accordingly, was the only one of the little party who was at ease; for both Joe and his wife were oppressed by the honour their guests were conferring on them. These scenes met Colonel Llord's eyes as he stooped to enter the cottage. Bolton greeted him undauntedly with,—

“Come in, colonel: you're just in time for a dish of nectar. Mrs. Joe knows how to brew, I can tell you. We had not strength of mind to refuse it: you must taste it.”

The colonel looked as he felt, aghast! he pressed the piece of wood into his neck, and without a word, turned to fly. His lawyer, Mr. Graham, judiciously blocked up the doorway behind him, and whispered entreatingly—

"Pray consider, Sir, of what importance it is not to hurt the poor man's feelings."

Thus abjured, the colonel "turned him round about, and went into the den," trying hard to control himself, while Bolton vacated his seat for him, and Silly Joe brought some boiling tea in the shaving-tin which Bolton had kindly given up for that purpose. He beheld the greasy liquid, on whose surface floated particles of oily and miscellaneous matter, and in an agony, partly occasioned by a sudden twinge, and partly by the idea of drinking such a mixture, he started up, dashed the battered tin and its scalding contents at Joe, and, with a torrent of oaths, rushed madly from the house.

"It was a glorious victory," cried Bolton, as he related the story at home. "Joe's wife will never forgive the insult to her tea, and Joe's votes will be ours."

"Our virtue deserves a handsome reward," said Lord Charles. "I did not imagine you seriously meditated taking the villainous compound when you asked for it; I am certain it was distilled from old bones!"

"And rabbit skins," added the other; "especially the latter, for I rescued a lock of fur from going down my throat!"

"My dear boy," interposed his step-mother, insinuatingly, "do change the subject; it really makes me ill."

"We are going to Dulton Church to-morrow," said Lord Charles; "will you allow me to drive you over?"

"No, thank you. You two young men and Mr. Brown will make enough sensation."

"Fancy!" exclaimed Nelly, "they declare they will go in late, with large Bibles under their arms, and repeat all the responses in very loud voices."

"Then," exclaimed her sister, "we had certainly better

not go ; there is no occasion for so many of us to be hypocrites in God's house."

Lord Charles looked up quickly at the scornful face, but she vouchsafed no softening clause.

Nelly saw the young man's look, and the expression of doubt that followed ; to change the subject, she continued quickly,—

"Constance, they are coming to your chapel in the afternoon. Who do you think originated the scheme?"

"Roger Frampton," I should say ; "he considers himself so grand since he has been to college, and since Mr. Lance took him round to canvass the farmers."

"Papa says he's a smart young man ; he brought him in here last night."

"Here ! in this drawing-room ! Did he sit down?"

(She expressed so much surprise because she was fully aware that her mother's relations were regarded by the Lances as only on an equality with their upper servants.)

"Of course," said Bolton, "and had tea here also ; don't you do the same, Miss Vyvianne, and are you not his first cousin?"

She blushed crimson, for Bolton's tone was very sarcastic. He had more than once told her openly that he saw she was ashamed of her relations, and she had resented the words all the more vehemently because she felt their truth. She waived the insinuation now, and only said,—

"I don't like the idea of Uncle John's being made fun of."

"That remark redeems a certain weakness of yours," replied her tormentor. "But we are not going there to be wicked, child. Merely as a matter of policy, Lord Charles must show himself at Dulton to convince the people of his upholding the church ; and we shall attend

chapel to show the Dissenters how large his toleration is, and how limitless his views of Protestantism."

Bertha had gone towards a window recess, and Bolton and Constance followed her; she waited till she thought the rest of the party were engaged on another topic, and then said earnestly,—

"Wrong cannot be right at any time, Bolton dear: hypocrisy can't be productive of good. If you must go to Dulton, and to chapel, do behave properly, to please me."

"Of course! Nelly always rattles on so foolishly: you don't suppose we are going to act like heathens! A nice opinion you must have of Charles and me."

He turned away, only half relishing his sister's lecture, and Constance said confidentially to Bertha,—

"I am sure Lord Charles would not do wrong, he is so very handsome."

"Ridiculous, child!"

"Bertha, don't *you* think so? Oh! I hope he'll win, don't you?"

"I don't know—yes, of course," was the contradictory reply; but the soft light in her eyes betrayed that her indifference was unreal.

The next remark was rather startling.

"Do you think he will marry Nelly, or you?"

"Good gracious!" For once Bertha was surprised out of her propriety. "Constance! your thoughts are always of matrimony; this comes of Nelly's novels. Pray mind what you say: you should not permit such ideas."

"But, Bertha," she persisted, "they all say in the village that he will marry one of you: I did not mean to annoy you, only——"

"Never mind, dear, only pray dismiss the idea. I am

certain neither Lord Charles nor I—I mean we—have the slightest idea—” she drew herself up impressively, hoping she was putting a stop to such gossip in a decided manner, when—there stood the subject of their discussion before her !

“Listeners never hear any good of themselves,” he said, with evident amusement. “So you do not give me credit for having an idea, Miss Bertie ?”

Bertha hastily quitted the recess, betraying a consciousness which, if it detracted from her dignity, decidedly added to her beauty. Nelly noticed her blushing cheeks, and said rather maliciously,—

“What a pity pink is not our colour, it is so much more becoming ; don’t you think so, Bertie dear ?”





CHAPTER VI.

JOHN GITTENS IN PUBLIC.

SPIRETON CHAPEL was but a large square room, with white-washed walls. Three windows, one on each side, and the third above the door, gave sufficient light by day, and in the dark winter afternoons, watch-nights, and love-feasts, artificial light was diffused by sundry tallow candles dispersed in little tin sconces. These candles were useful in more ways than one, as their frequent want of snuffing afforded a capital shield against the attacks of Somnus ; that duty being judiciously awarded to the two drowsiest members of the congregation. Wooden benches occupied the red-bricked floor, ranged in straight lines facing the pulpit, which was an unpretending structure consisting of common uncarved wood, painted dirt colour ; its style was obscure, partaking more of that generally in vogue for Jack-in-the-box than any known ecclesiastical pattern. One block of pews, however, rose on a slight elevation towards the side opposite the pulpit, and behind the benches, and was reserved especially for the aristocracy, consisting of the Gittenses and Framptons, and two other families. The minister's pew was the highest, and overlooked the entire congregation ; that occupied by the Framptons was immediately before it ; both were large

square pews of dimensions that would be a blessing to the much enduring fair sex in these crinoline days.

All the worshippers were assembled for afternoon service, when the young men from the manor entered ; and Roger Frampton, who, knowing of their intended visit, had been long and anxiously watching the door, instantly left his pew to meet and conduct them to it. Constance watched her aunt crumple back her gorgeous red satin gown to make more room, and wondered whether Bolton would notice the bright blue bonnet that, worn in conjunction, was considered in the Frampton family a most *recherché* toilette ; while the young ladies, greatly excited, officiously found the hymns, and deprived themselves of their own books for these grand visitors ; but, vulgar as was their fussy behaviour, Constance could notice it with more toleration than Roger's, who had never appeared more odious than on this occasion.

The soldier and the sailor, without jewelry or finery of any sort, stood calm and upright, listening profoundly and respectfully to Mr. Gittens' ungrammatical exposition ; imbibing the mingled fragrance of peppermint and hair oil without even a curve of the nostril, and receiving the young ladies' oppressive attentions with reverential gratitude. Nor even when Farmer Frampton (who, by virtue of possessing the loudest voice in the neighbourhood, led off the singing) made several false starts before he pitched on a tune to suit the metre of the hymn, did a muscle of their motionless countenances betray the astonishment they felt.

But Roger was never still ; first he moved his gaudy ring to the hand nearest the stranger's, then he gracefully waved that hand, or let it rest on the top of the pew for the benefit of the assembly generally ; then he jingled the huge seal at his fob — as nowadays weak-

minded young men jingle the charms that dangle on their waistcoats ; and finally assumed a wearied attitude and expression, similar to that he had observed dissipated gownsmen do at early chapel. His cousin, watching these manœuvres, and thoroughly understanding them, hated him yet more than formerly ; though in the eyes of his admiring family he was much improved by his career at college. The constant use of a leaden comb had diminished the brilliancy of his thick red hair, and his clothes were cut in the most striking fashion of the day. Two waistcoats elaborately flowered — one white, the other buff—a blue coat, the tails of which tapered gracefully down to the bend of his knees, where they were finished off by brass buttons the size of half-a-crown, a broad shirt frill, and a ‘bird’s-eye’ stock, in which was stuck a little square seed pearl brooch, formed a marvellous *tout ensemble*, the splendour of which could not disguise the coarseness of his thick-set person and freckled heavy features. This sight made Constance so very far from devotional, that Mrs. Gittens administered a warning dig from her bony knuckles, and an admonishing shake of her wrathful head to make her attend to her uncle’s sermon.

Poor John Gittens ! he was sadly discomposed also at the presence of a lord in his chapel, and his honest but unavailing efforts to speak naturally, made him unnatural, abstruse, and less grammatical than usual. In vain he tried to remember the neatly rounded periods that had sounded so smoothly as he rehearsed them in his garden that morning ; he gradually lost confidence in himself, and was obliged to take refuge in ranting. When he ranted, as a matter of course, he talked nonsense,—nonsense that bordered on profanity. He thumped his pulpit with the energetic sounding thump that the fist of

a Methodist parson alone can give: he assured his hearers that the devil had them all fast by the legs, and he improvised a confidential conversation between himself and St. John wherein that Apostle had congratulated him upon the exalted place awaiting him in heaven. He then proceeded to describe another interview which he had held with the very notorious and dark-hued personage whose name is never mentioned in polite society—an interview the particulars of which he described in such awfully minute terms, that the weaker part of the congregation were overpowered, and sobs and groans resounded on all sides.

A loud “hem!” from Mrs. Gittens had no effect to stem the questionable eloquence! John was too confused to hear, much less to heed it. Other sounds now prevailed. A tender-hearted woman applying the preacher’s dire anathema to herself, shook her head so despairingly as to cause her bonnet strings to give way with an audible crack, and the bonnet falling back unexpectedly, so startled a man behind her, that he involuntarily shrank aside, and in so doing deposited his hobnailed shoe on the favourite corn of his neighbour, an old woman, who, in the intense pain of the moment, forgot where she was, and with shrill volubility scolded the offender.

The quavering treble of the angry woman, the ranting of the minister, and the moans, and groans, and exclamations of the assembly, made a very Babel; it had the effect, however, of at last recalling John to his senses; his subdued voice soon restored peace, and he was enabled to continue his discourse in a less exciting strain.

But his wife’s keen eyes had pretty well read in the countenances of the strangers their opinion of the commotion, and though she owned she had no patience with

"them sleepy Church folk," yet she could not help allowing that on this occasion the proceedings had been highly indecorous. An emphatic blast on her nasal organ was a signal too sonorous to be disregarded, and it stopped John just as he was about to give the exact hour, day, month, and year when his "call" happened; for had he dared to neglect that warning, which he knew was only resorted to on special occasions, short commons, grim silence, and bitter neglect, would have desolated his home paradise for days afterwards.

He was meek and silent enough when, after the service, he joined the group who were awaiting him in the chapel-yard. His wife, Constance, and the whole of the Framp-ton family, were there, and the two young men from the Manor were making themselves agreeable to the party. The latter put out their hands in return to his humble obeisance, and cordially thanked him for "his very excellent and stirring sermon." They had plenty of compliments, too, for the young ladies, whose giggling and "Oh, la's!" showed their appreciation of the broad flattery, while Constance, in mute disgust, stood silently observant.

When the farmer, his wife and daughters took leave, Lord Charles made Mrs. Gittens take his arm, and, having overcome her scruples, escorted her gallantly towards her house. Roger let his family go without him, and remained close by Bolton, while Constance, holding her uncle's hand, followed in Mrs. Gittens' wake. Strong-minded as was Hester Jane Gittens, yet the fact of walking arm-in-arm with a nobleman, in full view of her envious neighbours, "fairly flustered her," to use her own expression. She said afterwards that he talked so nicely, too, without any flummery or nonsense, that he quite won her heart, and (what was of more importance)

her husband's vote ; indeed, at parting she was so uncommonly elated and good tempered that she allowed him to carry off Constance to spend the evening at the Manor : an unprecedented indulgence on Sunday.

Roger took leave of his aunt and uncle with a familiar nod, and went on with his cousin and her friends. As they crossed the fields between the village and the Manor shrubberies, Helen and Bertha met them, and Roger, no way abashed, walked by the side of the former. Bolton's eyes encountering the child's, her surprised expression amused him ; so he repressed his own inclination to resent the young man's familiarity, and encouraged him in his smart sayings and conceited airs, out of pure love of mischief.

Helen's smiles, which were never withheld when her companion was of the opposite sex, drew him out sufficiently to render him supremely ridiculous. The merriment of Constance and Bolton was unrestrained, for Bertha and Lord Charles were sauntering too far behind, and were too much engrossed with the wild flowers in their path—at least that was their impression—to notice anything beside, so the child mimicked her cousin's gesticulations and mincing steps, and, at last, excited by Bolton's smothered laughter, told Roger plainly that she was sure his tea was ready, and he had better go home.

Nelly looked at her angrily, and talked faster than ever to cover her squire's evident confusion. Roger revenged himself, however ; for as he bade good-bye—not until they reached the avenue gate, though—he said, spitefully,—

“ Good-bye, Betsy Jane ! I hope you've brought your pinafore, for that's your best frock ; be sure you don't over-eat yourself ; and,” he added, as she blushed

crimson with rage, "you've walked too fast—your face is scarlet, my dear."

Her outraged vanity mastered every other feeling.

"If I am scarlet," she cried, "it is the reflection of your hair!"

He was fairly beaten, and walked away quickly.

Bolton turned away to hide a smile, but Nelly exclaimed,—

"That was beyond a joke, Constance!"

In a moment the child had seen the fault, and Bertha felt for her. With the generous pity a noble nature has for the folly of a friend, she said, softly,—

"I am sure she did not intend to hurt his feelings: it was all owing to her thoughtlessness."

But Constance knew she had committed a grave fault, and its being witnessed by those whose good opinion she valued most in the world, humbled her yet more; she burst into a passion of tears, and darted away to hide her shame.

Mr. Bolton did not feel himself unblamable for his share in the scrape, and when Mr. Lance noticed her swollen eyes and subdued manner, he felt himself bound to go to her rescue; which he effected by getting his father to smoke with him. As he saw her go quietly off to a window apart from the ladies, and seat herself sadly, alone, he began to feel pained, and for the first time considered how many disadvantages she had, and how differently she was situated to his sisters.

Hitherto he had classed her with those uncomfortable beings, who, too old for dolls, and too young for society, rejected by children, and scarcely tolerated by young women, seem in the way of both, and are generally either stupidly bashful or detestably pert. But her humiliation and modesty gave him a better opinion of her. The

result of his unwonted cogitations was to cause him to inquire,—

“I say, father, what is Vyvianne going to make of that girl of his?”

“Going to make of her!” echoed Mr. Lance, startled by the abruptness of the question. “Why, really! make of her? My dear boy, one can’t make anything of a woman!”

“No, to be sure, not much; but isn’t there some one better fitted to look after her than that female Gittens?”

“Bless me! she’s well enough. Nelly looks after her; we all look after her; we all like her. Why I suppose Vyvianne will come back some day, and then she’ll be all right!”

“Vyvianne is only thirty-five, Sir; he’s sure to marry again: he ought to give her a good education, at all events. Where are his aunts? They used to be devoted to him; why don’t they do something for his child?”

“They are too proud to notice the granddaughter of a Methodist parson; besides, I think they have never acknowledged his marriage!”

“Can they prevent him inheriting their property?”

“Certainly, if they choose to do so;” and here, as he looked bored, as he always was when anyone interrupted him in the enjoyment of his evening cigar, Bolton thought proper to put but one more question; it was,—

“Does Vyvianne mean to bring her up as a lady, or is she to degenerate into a rustic Methodist, and marry a clodhopper?”

“Oh!” cried his father, knocking off the ashes of his cigar, “how you do run on. You’ll ruin your digestion,

if you work your brains so soon after dinner. You must ask your mother; she knows all about everything. I believe some one has written to Vyvianne about some scheme of education; but I forget, and so does he, I dare say, how time flies! He was always a thoughtless fellow."

And the squire pushed his hat far off his brow, and stood still; a hint his son understood to signify that his father would prefer solitude, and so he left him. On which Mr. Lance, with a sigh of relief, pursued his saunter, muttering, "A sadly restless spirit! he'll wear his brains out."

There was little fear of any such catastrophe befalling himself; his calm, blue eyes soon resumed their usual listless study of nothing, and the smoke rose uninterruptedly and evenly from his cigar. Speculation, however, once again stirred the placid, dreamy countenance, and turning round with sudden energy, he called Bolton back. Wondering what had roused this unusual animation, the latter eagerly retraced his steps. The squire took his arm confidentially, and persuasively exclaimed,—

"My dear boy! I have always forgotten to mention that if you will throw away that very dirty and disreputable pipe, I will give you a case of cigars with every quarter's allowance."

"Dirty!" cried Bolton, "disreputable!" and taking his short black pipe from his pocket he regarded it with admiration; the survey of its perfections enabling him to recover sufficiently to answer—

"Do you call that dirty?—that tint dirt? Why it took our cox'n all the way from the Levant to Gib, to get it into condition! I gave him five shillings and the tobacco for colouring it, and our captain offered me a guinea for it the very day we landed. Dirty! well I'm——"

What, did not transpire, for he felt his indignation overcoming him, and wisely determined to put an end to further discussion by walking off. The squire laughed a soft, contemptuous laugh, and looking after his son, he uttered the single word, "demented," and lighted a fresh Havannah to soothe his disturbed mind.





CHAPTER VII.

A BOW FOR A BEAU.

BOLTON joined his mother, Nelly, and Lord Charles on the lawn. Bertha was sitting at a little distance, far enough off for her to read without being disturbed by their voices.

"Of what are you talking so earnestly?" he asked.

"Lord Charles cannot tell us whether Miss Frampton was at Dulton Church this morning?"

"Of course she was, sitting opposite to us; didn't you observe a pink spencer, and the pink lining of her hat?"

"Oh, I recollect: rather a good looking woman; in fact, I flattered myself the admiration was mutual. Who is she, and why is she against us so violently?"

"To make a sensation," cried Nelly; "Dulton does not afford many opportunities for its inhabitants to distinguish themselves, and it has been her aim all her life to make a sensation."

"Is Lord a great ally of hers?"

"No, he never spoke to her until the other day, but, on the contrary, studiously avoided coming in contact with her. You know he's not a ladies' man, as you could tell by his conversation with us the other day: his remarks are neither choice nor interesting; but she is not very fastidious, and they say she walked up to him and——"

"I'll tell you the truth," said Bolton. "I beg your

pardon for interrupting you, Nelly, but I happen to know the facts."

"Go on," said Nelly. "I had nothing more to tell."

"Well," resumed Bolton, "she tried first to get him to the house, through her father, but as that didn't answer she adopted a summary proceeding of her own planning; which was to rush out upon him one day as he was passing, to lead him deliberately by the arm across the threshold, and before he recovered from his surprise to pop him into an easy chair in the dining-room, with a tempting display of materials for making his favourite beverage, which is rum-punch! She succeeded so well that he hadn't a word to say for himself until he was fairly caught, and seated, and then the sight of the punch softened his intended outburst of wrathful indignation; the taste did more, and a speech from his fair captor completely reconciled him to his unexpected imprisonment.

"What did she say?"

"She threw herself into the opposite chair and exclaimed, "By the royal wig! that was a bold stroke of mine!"

"My dear Bolton," said Mrs. Lance, in a mild tone of expostulation, "is not this a little romance of your own composition?"

"No, I assure you, I had it word for word from her Cousin Roger: she's cut him, because he's on our side, and she vows Lord shall be returned at any cost."

"But tell me, what did the colonel say?" asked Nelly.

"The oath won his heart entirely, for it is the last new one, a delicate compliment to the Regent, I hear. At any rate, he never goes to the town without paying her a visit, and always finds the *spiritual* comfort ready for him."

"Has she much interest?"

"Well, I suppose so ; her father owns the claypits near here."

"What a fearful female," sighed Lord Charles ; and his eyes sought Bertha, and rested admiringly on the perfect repose of her attitude. Other hopes and wishes than those connected with the coming struggle came uppermost as he looked, and made him rise from the garden seat and approach her.

Bertha had told her sister that she should not wear the party colour at the election ; "she had no notion of appearing in Lord Charles's livery !" However, most likely the dress she now wore, with pale blue trimmings, had been made long before there was a chance of her favourite hue becoming a political badge ; whichever was the truth, the white muslin and the bright ribbons were very advantageous to the wearer, and the fair form backed by the blooming garden made a very pretty tableau. So thought Lord Charles. Her bosom rose and fell with rather more emotion than her apparently unconscious attitude warranted as he drew near over the noiseless grass, and under their long lashes and clearly veined lids, her eyes sparkled with a feeling the motionless countenance did not betray ; the start with which she at last showed herself aware of his presence, was very naturally performed.

Bolton's sharp eye had noticed the little scene ; nor had Nelly been indifferent to it : the young man said softly,—

"I say, Nelly, do you twig anything in that quarter ?"

"Ridiculous boy !" was her rejoinder ; for she was not yet prepared to acknowledge even to herself that her young sister had, without striving, won what *she* had vainly sought ; so she accompanied her words with an affectation of amused superiority.

“*Nous verrons*,” he said, and walked away, humming,
“Whistle and I’ll come to thee, my lad,” more significantly than Miss Helen liked.

Lord Charles Bolton was decidedly nervous when, as the favourite candidate, he stood amid a throng of the neighbouring gentry in the dining-room of the Manor on the morning of the election day. The library and the hall were equally full of partisans assembled to swell his train as he made his entry into Dulton, while in the servants’ hall and housekeeper’s room, well-wishers of lower rank were entertained, and uncertain voters were made pot-valiant by a preparatory feed of mutton pies, and strong “October.”

In and out, among all these different classes, went Nelly and Constance; the latter carrying the basket of blue rosettes, which the former distributed, and for her particular friends adjusted, receiving in return numberless original compliments.

The majority were in boisterous spirits, brimful of hope; but a few were less sanguine, giving utterance to cowardly fears lest “those d—d pitmen,” through whose haunts the road to Dulton directly passed, should assault them.

“Fellows stronger than Hercules, Sir,” said one timid squireen: “fellows who own no law but might; who actually in the broad daylight gin pheasants, Sir, and have been seen in pursuit of a hare! When I was a boy, I attended an election at Dulton, Sir, as I am about to do to-day; these pitmen assembled, smashed all the windows, drove many of the inhabitants forcibly out of their own premises, Sir! and were only persuaded to retire by the promise of a rise in their wages, backed by a sight of the soldiers with levelled muskets, Sir!”

"A monstrous state of things," said Lord Charles, quietly; "but times are changed: they dare not try that game now."

"I beg your pardon, Sir; "it's my firm belief that on this occasion it will be ten times worse. I know for a fact they have all been excited to rebellion: they are all to a man for the colonel!"

"My dear Sir, that doesn't signify; they have not a vote among them!"

"Sir! Miss Frampton is engaged to marry the son of John Tasker, who, with her father, owns all these pits."

"I know, I know."

"Very well, Sir! then the thing is palpable. Tasker is of course for Llord; his men are for him; they will get a holiday and their pay all the same. Oh! I know it all of old, Sir! they will be told to come in and make a show of hands, and will be of sufficient importance to oblige us to demand a poll."

"No great harm in that. I never expected to win in a canter!"

"I agree with you; but when the voters from retired hamlets, and peaceable small farmers, see how these fellows outnumber us, they, whose property is mixed with their haunts, will be afraid to incur their dislike, and will turn from us at the last moment, sacrificing their political opinions to save a miserable brood of chickens or ducklings from their marauding hands; so after all the pitmen will triumph without votes."

"Right *shall* triumph for once. I tell you this won't be like former elections. The colonel has grown old and stingy: he keeps a one-horse tilbury, instead of a coach and six; in lieu of lavishing money on all sides, he locks it up in expensive pictures, of the value of which he is incapable of judging; he never buys anything

in his own neighbourhood, but saves all to spend in London ; whereas look at Mr. Lance, *he* gets everything at Dulton, as far as possible."

"That I'll allow : if Dulton votes *only* can return you, you're safe."

Lord Charles turned from his faint-hearted disputant. His eyes and his thoughts had not been with his tongue ; but had followed Bertie's movements, and now that he had succeeded in freeing himself from his compulsory *tête-à-tête*, he made his way, with as much indecision in appearance as was possible, to where she stood trying to make a deaf old gentleman hear her.

"I hope you will be fortunate."

"Eh ?"

"I hope you will be fortunate."

"I'm a little deaf, my dear. Eh ?"

"I hope you will be fortunate."

"Oh, indeed ! A fortune hunter. Ah ! a disagreeable character that : I didn't catch the name. *Who* is it ?"

She turned in despair to Lord Charles, who exerting his lungs, with delight at being able to render her any service, however slight, soon made the old man understand, and with a chuckle at his own mistake the latter hobbled off, leaving the young couple to themselves.

"Will you wish *me* success, Miss Bertie ?"

"Of course : I am not going to be a traitor to my colours."

"Don't laugh, I am very much in earnest ; I want you to wish me, *individually*, success : will you ?"

"I hope you will win ;" her eyes were downcast, and the pink deepened on her cheeks ; but the next instant she added saucily, "because I should not like to be on the losing side. Where are your colours ? You had

better claim a rosette at once, or all Nelly's will be given away."

He turned his back on the room and said, pleadingly,—

"I want you to give me yours ; with it near me, I shall feel sure of success !"

There was no danger, in the surrounding hubbub of talk, of their being overheard ; but Bertha, dreading to excite comment, and remembering the gossip of the village, tried to put a stop to his exclusive manner, by saying with an air of hauteur,—

"You should have lived in the days of chivalry. I can't flatter myself that my bow is so worthy of your acceptance as those in Nelly's basket, for mine is of my own making, while hers are the work of practised hands."

He saw the proud face, and heard the sarcastic tone, without knowing of the soft light in her averted eyes or noticing the tremble in her voice. "She is laughing at me," he thought, and without speaking again he turned to leave her. But she could not let him leave her thus, and hastily unpinned the little object of the dispute ; when as she hesitated to follow the dictates of her heart, which strongly prompted her to indulge his wish, up came Johnny Craven, and the knot of ribbon fell from her grasp.

Lord Charles had noticed her indecision, and when an intruder came and hindered the result, the look he cast upon him was annihilating. As it was, both the young men stooped to recover the lost property, but Lord Charles secured it, nor did he offer to give it back to its owner, and Bertha said nothing.

John Craven read happy excitement in Lord Charles's eyes, and noticed how Bertha's calm face, which had never before betrayed a weakness, varied ; he knew he

was *de trop*, yet still he stayed till Mr. Lance calling on all to mount, obliged the M.P. elect to tear himself away. Then Bertha forthwith administered such a snubbing to her *ci-devant* friend, that he inwardly vowed to steer clear of all young couples henceforth and for ever. He was less able than usual to bear unkindness just then ; for the fact was, Miss Nelly had a few moments before cruelly lacerated his feelings, and it was to have these wounded feelings soothed that he had sought the quiet friendship of her sister.

He had ventured to remonstrate with the elder for bestowing too much civility on Roger Frampton, who somehow or other had managed to take his place amongst the gentlemen in the dining-room ; he had seen her decoying smiles awaken ambitious hopes in the young man's admiring eyes, and experience taught him the impossibility of disregarding her fascinations. A pang of regret, half anger, half jealousy, that the woman he loved could thus lower herself, led him to interfere ; but his mistake was soon apparent. She listened to his expostulations calmly, but her glance required no words to express its meaning ; it said plainly enough, " Your interference is unwarrantable : by what right do you dare to assert authority over me and my actions ? " He stood his ground, though, until she was fain to continue her task of distributing colours.

Mrs. Lance had already objected to entertain young Frampton in her drawing-room, but the squire had assured her that it was politic to tolerate him for a time. " He is an important man on our committee," he explained ; " his father's interest among the farmers has done us good service. Put up with his gaucherie till after the election, my dear ; he'll soon return to his proper place after that."

But neither Mr. nor Mrs. Lance imagined how Miss Helen, in her thirst for universal homage, was leading her too willing victim to believe himself beloved, while in her family she professed only to tolerate his presence. Poor Johnny ! the result of his attempt, then, was to embroil himself with both sisters, and then to stand aside watching Roger Frampton ; who, in his turn, was darkly regarding Helen in the centre of a group of six or seven elderly gentlemen, to whose old-fashioned gallantry she was laughingly listening : for they, in the attempt of each one to be sole speaker, were all choking over their sweet speeches. Oh ! how Roger longed to be rid of his ancient rivals !

At last a second summons caused the old men to move away, and while they were being safely deposited on their broad-backed cobs, he managed to obtain a parting word and smile from the young lady. Unhappily for him his egotism induced him to place implicit reliance on her seeming regard : her beauty and position dazzled his senses, her light words sank deep into his heart. Knowing nothing of society but what he learnt from romantic, second-rate books, he believed that love could overstep all obstacles ; and the unfortunate manner in which he had been brought up to believe himself irresistible, caused him to set no bounds to his hopes. Nelly little thought what mischief she was doing while she amused herself with his credulity.

John Craven stood with the ladies to see the cavalcade of gentlemen ride off, and when the last horseman had gone out of sight, he refused Mrs. Lance's invitation to stay luncheon, and took his solitary homeward way. As he went he took himself seriously to task for placing his happiness in the hands of these gay young girls ; for Bertie's unexpected anger was almost as hard to bear as

Nelly's scorn. He blamed himself for wishing to marry a woman who he knew would not undertake to be a fellow labourer with him in his responsible position ; and, though for a moment he exulted in the thought that as the holder of his own living, and heir to a comfortable estate, he could afford to have efficient assistance without burdening himself and his wife with parish drudgery, the thought was instantly repulsed as unworthy : for he remembered his kind hearty father, and the change that must take place in that cheerful family circle before his means would enable him to do all this. Then, again, a single verse came meaningly to his mind : "No man having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God." So he determined on keeping out of temptation for the future, and resolved to visit at the Manor only as often as civility required, to study more, and to work harder among his poor parishioners : which prudent resolutions lasted until five o'clock P.M. of that same day, and no longer ; for at that hour his father called at the rectory, and begged him to accompany him to the Lances', to hear what had been done at Dulton, and the son having no excuse at hand, once more deliberately courted pain.

During dinner—for they were persuaded to partake of that meal—grace was all the talking that fell to John Craven's share, for the events of the day had to be recounted for the benefit of the ladies, who had no ears for any other subject ; so he was unnoticed, until Bolton, in a voice that, for a moment, stemmed the torrent of conversation and arrested general attention, inquired whether anything had disagreed with him.

After dinner, when the gentlemen joined the ladies, Bolton again commented on the young parson's melancholy appearance by asking his sisters, privately,—

"Which of you has offended Johnny Craven? I can't make out whether biliousness or jealousy has spoilt his complexion."

"You are too young to stay so long in the dining-room," said Bertha, and she walked towards the open window, with what her brother called "the air of a tragedy queen."

The evening was drawing to a close, long shadows lay on the sloping lawn, the landscape was featureless under the darkening sky, the waves rose and fell with a soothing, liquid lullaby, drowsily regular, and the shags, with outspread wings and straining necks, were flying lazily towards the cliffs from their supper in the backwater. Bertha's gaze passed over the drooping flowers, the motionless plantations, and the formless scenery, till it rested on the misty waters; but her senses were not so entirely engrossed as to make her unaware of some one coming across the room towards her: nor did she start when a voice said, close to her ear,—

"What a heavenly night! What a contrast to the day spent in that wretched little town, torn in pieces by party spirit!"

She continued her steadfast and somewhat sad gaze over the sea, without replying; indeed, his remark called for no reply.

Lord Charles began again.

"I hope you are sorry for our defeat to-day?"

"No, I expected it: you and everyone said it could not be otherwise: the show of hands for the colonel was unavoidable, because of the pitmen. Why should I be sorry for what is of no consequence?"

"You will go on Thursday to witness my—our triumph?"

"Oh, yes! I believe we are all going to hear the

speeches ; but Mr. Tasker has been telling me dreadful things : he declares the pitmen have sworn to prevent your election ! ”

“ Old Tasker is a coward ; such reports are not worth a thought. Let them try to prevent me ! I am invulnerable while I have my blue ribbon here.” (She knew without looking that he touched his heart as he spoke.) “ But death at their hands would be rather ignominious. I wonder if your father would give me decent burial ? ”

For one moment her eyes were raised to his, and he continued, with more assurance than was altogether prudent with such a very sensitive young lady :

“ I wonder if you would spare my memory one tear, or one sigh. I am afraid our friend, the melancholy parson, would sing a *Te Deum* instead of a dirge over my remains. Upon my soul ! I can’t help pitying that poor fellow.”

There was a tone of triumph that grated discordantly on Bertha’s ears. The “tragedy air” replaced her gentle attitude of attention.

“ You are labouring under a slight delusion,” she said, in reference to his remark upon John Craven ; and with head erect, she swept back into the lighted room, nearly upsetting the young parson in her stately progress : he having been enjoying himself with furtively watching the twilight conference.

“ She will carry things with too high a hand,” thought Nelly, who was never too much engaged to be unobservant of others.

Nelly had at length allowed that her own chance of captivating Lord Charles was ended, and that next to having him for a husband, it would be best to be his sister-in-law ; especially as Lord Spireton’s daughters

and the Craven girls had all expressed their admiration of him. Helen dare not speak openly to her sister, Bertie being in her opinion "ridiculously reserved" on such matters ; and with a sigh she could only lament her inability to set her a correct example under similar circumstances.





CHAPTER VIII.

DOUBLY VICTORIOUS.

THE all-important day arrived, and Dulton swarmed with country people ; not only those who were to enter their votes, but also a throng of others who had come merely to partake of the general excitement. The pitmen were conspicuous by their clay-besmeared hands and clothes ; but they did not appear in any unusually large body, and moved about peaceably enough. The hustings—a frail wooden gallery, with wooden steps at each end — was reared against the town hall, which formed a corner of the two principal streets opposite the Lion, which constituted the corresponding corner. The whole of the Lion was taken by Mr. Lance's party, and its front windows were filled by his lady friends. From these windows a good view of the four principal streets was obtained, and the ever changing throng of excited partisans, scowling and jostling their adversaries, afforded plenty of amusement.

Foremost among all was Miss Frampton, dressed in a complete suit of pink glazed calico, her cheeks rivalling her brilliant dress. This indefatigable lady darted in and out ; now arm-in-arm with a tipsy man, to steady his legs towards the right—*i.e.*, Colonel Llord's—polling-booth ; then waylaying some bewildered countryman, and by

sheer force of tongue, reversing his intentions, and compelling him to give his vote in favour of his adversary ; anon marching right into the parlour of a dirty inn with sanded floor, and carrying off some muddled townsman ; and presently bullying an unfortunate "general store dealer," who had vainly hoped, by closing his shutters and remaining quietly at home, to escape the fatal register.

Nor was the other side idle. Bolton had moored snugly alongside the quay a commodious sailing vessel well stocked with beer and provisions. Into this craft he had inveigled several independent voters, who had refused to promise either candidate, but who were suspected of leaning towards the Radicals ; and having plied them well with drink, a short sail was proposed to satisfy a doubt that the sailor had craftily raised concerning the abilities of the little vessel. Either the wind was contrary, or the tide was too strong ; at any rate there was a very serious delay in its return to its moorings, and the trip lasted so long, that it was night before the victims were permitted to behold their native town again. It is needless to remark that Bolton did not make one of these excursionists, and on his next meeting with them, he expressed his disappointment at their non-appearance at the polling-booth so naturally and heartily, that they felt it impossible to tax him with treason and connivance.

During the day, the gentlemen ran up and down pretty frequently to report progress to their fair friends, and Roger Frampton contrived occasionally to be the bearer of a message. Once he sought Miss Lance to tell her how cleverly he had misled three rustics, who, meaning to vote for the colonel, had been puzzled between his name and his opponent's title, and had implicitly followed Roger's kind advice and voted for Lord Charles, firmly believing their friendly guide to be a staunch Radical.

At these times jesuitry seems to be the approved and prevailing mode of action, and a man who would consider himself dishonoured by being merely a spectator of a deceitful action in ordinary matters, thinks nought at an election of committing downright sin : it is like the creed that admits of the unlimited indulgence of every carnal passion for a time, in consideration of the retributive penance to follow.

The town pump, upon which hung a placard announcing the state of the poll, was the centre of attraction to the throng who found the hours of voting rather wearying work, and who longed for the ardour of the hustings' declamation. Up to a quarter of an hour before the poll was to close, the numbers varied for both sides so continually as to make it a matter of great doubt which would win. The next moment, however, showed Colonel Llord to be one ahead, and the Pinks made so sure of success, that they paraded the streets headed by their chief, who looked perfectly victorious. Once more Lord Charles's committee examined their list, and racked their brains, lest there should be one who had not voted at all. There was one—Brown the butcher ; the miscreant had turned craven at the last, and remained neutral.

"He is our last chance," cried Bolton, "we have ten minutes to try for him. Come, Charley, let us go and unearth him : he's hiding at home, no doubt."

As they spoke, off they darted. The little shop was close by, and at its door, just vacating the premises, stood Miss Frampton and young Tasker ; the latter in coat and inexpressibles to match the gown of his intended. Miss Frampton smiled defiantly as she stepped aside to let them enter, and said,—

"I am sorry : but Mr. Brown has decamped or evaporated, and you are *done brown*."

With a taunting laugh at her own wit, she ran away followed by her admirer.

The little shop was in twilight, caused by closed shutters, and Mrs. Brown, standing in the shade, had arrived at the end of her patience.

"There now," she cried, in answer to the young men, "'tis no use asking ; my master can't afford to lose the Framptons' and Taskers' custom, no more than Mr. Lance's. I don't know where he is."

"My very good woman," pleaded Bolton, "we will for the future eat meat at every meal, and take sandwiches up to bed with us to keep under our pillows, if you will only get your husband to come and vote for us."

She smirked, but was obdurate in declaring,—

"It's no use, Sir: my good man says this ; he said, said he——"

"Ten minutes longer only!" cried Lord Charles in despair, and as he turned to go, his eyes fell on a large pickling tub which stood with the lid slightly raised under the counter, as he exclaimed, "What a large pickle tub!" The woman's face flushed up.

A moment sufficed for a flash of intelligence to communicate his thought to Bolton. The young men pulled it forth: surely tongue and beef never weighed so heavy before! and there crouching amidst the briny liquor was the recusant!

"Here's a pretty pickle!" Bolton shouted exultantly: time was too precious for more.

The butcher was extricated from his hiding-place, and while yet too bewildered to protest against it, was hurried off to the polling-booth, and his vote recorded for his captor before the clock struck the first chime of the closing hour.

The crowd jeered the dripping man as he returned,

half savage and half amused, and then there was breathless silence, as the state of the poll was for the last time declared.

Colonel Llord, 154.

Lord Charles Bolton, 154.

"What does it mean?" cried Bertha, as in the opposite windows the ladies crowded to read the announcement.

"Mean!" echoed Bolton, who had run up for a moment to assure his female allies, "Why that we are dead heats at present, but thanks to Llord's fastidiousness we are all right—the mayor has the casting vote."

"Do explain: how can we be all right when old Herring's politics are opposed to ours; he's the colonel's warmest partisan?"

"Don't be so impetuous, my dear; like the rest of your sex, you would all begin at the end of a story. I tell you Herring *was* what he isn't."

"Bolton!"

"Well, well! if I'd time I would certainly argue the point with you. The long, or rather short, of the matter is simply this. Herring, who, like all Radical rascals, delights in being noticed by the aristocracy, thinks Llord is no end of a swell. Hitherto the colonel has been very civil, had him over to lunch at Haxton, and shook hands whenever the old miller liked; but this morning, something went wrong, and a touch of neuralgia thoroughly soured the colonel's temper. Herring went into the committee-room, and as usual put out his fist in friendly salutation; it was rather grubby, and very warm, and Llord shirked it, fancying it was too late in the day for offence to be taken. But Herring's personal and civic dignity were wounded, and I, hearing of this, judiciously fomented his wrath with well-timed pity, and got

a kind friend to repeat Llord's allusion to him as 'that d—d dirty miller.' After this little anecdote I think you'll agree with me in pronouncing our victory safe: good-bye till you see me again."

The hustings were already filling. In the centre between the rival parties stood "the Worshipful the Mayor," in all the glory of his furred gown, and (borrowed) gold chain. The town clerk supported him on one hand, the mace-bearer on the other. Very supreme felt his lordship as he stood thus, holding in his obscure person the power to confer fame, and to overthrow the hopes of an aristocrat!

He stood silent for a little while, to enable the crowd below to appreciate his distinguished position; then he loudly declared—what everyone knew—the state of the poll at closing, and having allowed this information time to be digested, he made his opening speech.

First he commented in handsome terms upon the able manner in which their late representative, Colonel Llord, had fulfilled his onerous duties in Parliament, and having buoyed up the sanguine colonel, his worship turned to his left-hand neighbour, and eulogised him in equally flattering words.

It was impossible to glance from the colonel to his opponent without being forcibly struck by the vast difference their appearance afforded. The one, soured by pain and too sure of success to take the trouble to court popularity by paying attention to the minutiae of dress, looked old, ill, shabby, and bored; while the young officer's smiling face, trim figure, and youthful grace scarcely needed the aid of his smart uniform to render him attractive.

Having complimented both sides, the mayor proceeded in general terms, which may be described in vulgar par-

fance as "neither here nor there," to carry on his harangue; for like the rest of his townspeople, he liked to make the most of the rare occasions afforded him of distinguishing himself, and for a long time he was heard without interruption, until Colonel Llord, losing all patience, exclaimed uncivilly, and loud enough to be heard by the bystanders,—cut it short, my good man; cut it short; finish it out when we've gone home."

The mayor felt insult was added to injury, and as he noticed even his own mace-bearer grinning in appreciation of the remark, his ire augmented, and he determined no longer to postpone the blow he had resolved to deal. So he took the colonel's advice, and cut his speech short; but in a very different manner to what that worthy expected: and very clear and unmistakable were the tones and words in which he concluded.

"And as I, as mayor, have the privilege of determining the successful candidate for representing this ancient Borough of Dulton, I hereby declare that I record my casting vote in favour of—Major Lord Charles Bolton!"

When Bolton saw the sudden change in the countenances of the "Pinks" from certainty to blank dismay, he sprang forward, patted the mayor's distinguished back, pronounced him "a right down jolly old craft," and then, thrusting himself to the front of the hustings, he vociferated with all the force of lungs that had successfully battled against the roar of winds and waves,—
"Now then, my lads! Bolton for ever! and God save King George!"

Breathless silence, the silence that follows an unimagined piece of intelligence, had succeeded to the mayor's announcement; but as the "Blues" caught up Bolton's congratulatory shout, the opponents seemed to arouse themselves to the reality of their disappointment,

and, maddened by the little anticipated defeat, they commenced striking out violently with hands and feet, yelling discordant oaths and threatenings the while. From threats they proceeded to deeds: stones were hurled indiscriminately around, and one grazed Bolton Lance's temple, and broke a window of the hall behind him; yet he never flinched, but lightly kissing his hand to the spot from whence the blow came, he undauntedly led off a fresh burst of cheering. His voice yet rang through the town, and the new member, bareheaded, still stood bowing and smiling at his very turbulent constituents, when their companions on the hustings became agitated with unfeigned alarm; the quick raising of shutters to the lower parts of the houses, the hasty withdrawal of females from open doors and balconies, and the dismayed consultation among the Pinks who yet congregated together on the hustings, showed mischief was apprehended. A minute longer sufficed to show in what quarter. A swarm of white-faced, rough-coated pitmen suddenly surged up the narrow streets; springing up from all quarters, armed with sticks and stones, they hurled the dangerous missiles before them as they came rushing onward.

Like the heads of cherubim on old monuments, the heads of the ladies clustered together in the windows of the Lion, to gaze with horror on this spectacle. Mr. Lance, at the request of Lord Charles, who had caught a glimpse of one pale anxious face, ran across at the first alarm to quiet the fears of the dismayed women, and remained with them. When the new M.P. had seen them withdraw into the background, his spirits rose, and he cried to Bolton,—

“Now for some fun!”

Swearing, screaming, dashing along like madmen, the

pitmen advanced until their opponents had entirely yielded to their resistless force, and vacated the market-square : from the hustings nothing was to be seen but an upturned mass of heated faces, and gesticulating clay-smearcd forms.

"Drow 'un down, a bloated grandee ! drow 'un down," was yelled, as they glared upwards at Lord Charles.

"He's as thin as a whipping post, my fine fellows," screamed Bolton in reply.

Stones flung recklessly from all quarters checked his further speech. He caught one lightly as if it were a cricket ball, and bowing politely as in acknowledgment of a flattering token of their regard, he still further exasperated them.

"Pull down the hustings !" was now the general cry. In vain the mayor cleared his throat authoritatively, in vain the mace-bearer waved his mace aloft to command order, in vain Mr. Frampton—who began seriously to regret the holiday he had given—declared he would discharge every pitman who continued the tumult ; they would heed nothing but their own excited wills, and the work of destruction was commenced forthwith.

The colonel and his partisans instantly vacated their side of the perilous post, and the mayor, feeling himself powerless, exhorted all the rest to do likewise. Nearly all obeyed him, but Lord Charles's blood was up.

"I'll never give in to such ruffians," he cried.

"Nor I," echoed Bolton.

"Nor I," repeated Roger Frampton : and the three remained alone on the frail building, which was already beginning to rock under their feet ; though from the windows behind them friendly hands were stretched to aid them to climb up into safety.

The few constables, who laid about them with their

staves at the outskirts of the crowd, were but like little terriers snapping at the heels of infuriated bloodhounds engaged with other prey, and were soon incapacitated by a few "back-handers" from the lawless insurgents, whose passions increased as the danger deepened.

Mr. Frampton, fearing he knew not what, and instigated by his daughter—who, to do her justice, bitterly repented her share in permitting the men to be absent from their work—resorted to stronger measures, and, forgetting all political differences, he rushed up the "Lion" staircase, and presenting himself hurriedly before the assembled Blues in their stronghold, cried,—

"Mr. Lance, you must call out the soldiers—these fellows are beyond my control."

"Eh! what?"

"You must call out the soldiers, Sir, or there'll be bloody work down yonder. Look! look! the rafters can't stand that much longer."

"No, no, I'd rather not resort to such strong measures," the squire said hesitatingly. "Lord Charles might not like me to interfere. I don't fear for the young men."

"I tell 'ee," reiterated Mr. Frampton, "you *must* fear. Look at that mad throng; if they get hold o' them lads in their present state, they'd tear 'em in pieces as——"

As he spoke, an officer came quickly into the room.

"Why don't you call us out?" he exclaimed; "there will be murder presently: we are all ready; only need to open the gates: those men are savages!"

"Dear Captain Graham!" cried Mrs. Lance, imploringly, "go, go at once. Oh! the wretches! they will kill my boy."

The squire still dreaded being responsible for such an order; a stifled cry from Bertha made him turn to the

window, and as he looked he, too, became agitated, and he exclaimed passionately,—

“Yes, for Heaven’s sake, try what you can do. Go, Graham, go.”

The officer needed no second bidding.

The hustings was now a mere skeleton : rafter after rafter had fallen. Roger Frampton fell through, but escaped miraculously, while the others saved themselves by leaping backward as the slight erection was torn from beneath them ; and as they clung to the sole remaining poles, they cheered defiantly at the howling mob, who yelled louder than ever as they neared their fancied victory.

“Hold on like grim Death !” cried Lord Charles and his companion ; “here comes our rescue !” And noiselessly down the street, behind the rebels, they saw the little compact troop of infantry advancing towards the scene of action, and then the bugle rang clear and sharp close in the ears of the hitherto unconscious rioters. A shriek of baffled rage burst from them as they turned, to find themselves surrounded by levelled muskets planted against an unflinching line of scarlet ; and, with an instantaneous rush, the soldiers broke through the living barrier.

Then followed an ignoble scamper and a victorious pursuit. Then courage returned to the craven hearts of panic-stricken householders, as the mayor pompously read the Riot Act to a deserted market-square. The heroes of the day visited the fainting ladies ; all trace of confusion gradually vanished, as the soldiers locked up their captives in the barrack guard-room, and the speechifying recommenced in a highly satisfactory manner—at least to the Blues. Colonel Llord vented his deep indignation ; but whether at the mayor for this treachery

or the pitmen for their ruffianism, was not very clear. The Blues made their throats sore with hurrahing, and the Pinks drank themselves contentedly stupid. The evening was advancing before the gentlemen were at liberty to accompany the ladies on their return to the Manor.

Captain Graham wished to be allowed to escort them across the heath; but Mr. Lance was positive in his objections:

"I know the fellows," he declared; "they have spent their fury; they know better than to molest us again: better trust them now."

"You know best, of course!" was the reply, in that tone so familiar to us all, which implies the very contrary.

Mr. Lance, Bertha, Lord Charles, and Bolton were the first to leave Dulton: the ladies being the most timid of the party, and the gentlemen the most obnoxious, they were sent on first, that they might be in view of the rest. But a delay prevented the other carriages starting so soon as was intended, and the first had passed out into the quiet, shadowy country before the Cravens could make up their minds whether to go out or inside their coach.

"Oh! all's quiet enough," said Lord Charles, as he looked over the solitary waste; "those fellows have had noise enough to last them for the present."

"I'm glad you feel comfortable," said Bolton; "look at Bertie's white cheeks. Cheer up, dear! Captain Graham has promised to let some of his men follow us with wheelbarrows to pick up the pieces and give us decent burial, in case we are assaulted again."

"Don't jest," cried Mrs. Lance, nervously.

But as they rolled smoothly on through the cool evening air, it was impossible to feel long uneasy. On either

hand, the pleasant meadows lay lonely and silent in the fading light, and the breeze was fragrant with the scent of the dew-bright, flowery hedgerows; repose was on all around—the repose of weary day dying in the lap of night.

The universal stillness took effect even upon the young men, who had been endeavouring, by the force of example, to raise their companions' spirits, and as they entered the long gray road across the barren heath, with the wide, undulating, unenclosed gorse-land stretching on either hand, they, too, succumbed to the solemnity of the hour, and Bolton's merry tongue ceased while he pictured spectres of ancient Saxons hovering round the distant barrows, or crouching behind the clumps of creaking pines that occasionally bordered the way.

Lord Charles's attention was much more pleasantly engaged, as he noticed how the soft, uncertain light invested Bertha's young face with a more fascinating beauty. He could look without disturbing the picture, for her eyes were fixed far out in the gloaming, wearing a rapt expression, half sad, half tender, as if reading, in the shadowy view, a hopeless or a happy future. He knew every dimple on the fair, soft skin, every shade of the earnest eyes, every ripple in the sunny hair, and while he enjoyed his unnoticed gaze in the friendly shade of the waning light, he, with the inconsistency of a lover, could not help breaking the reverie which disquieted while it charmed him. And how commonplace were his words, as he said,—

“I am afraid you are very tired, Miss Bertie.”

“What an ass she will think me,” was his added inward comment.

She turned her gaze from the fading sky, and answered dreamily, as if loth to be disturbed,—

"Oh, no ; but, after all, you see papa was right—we should have been much better at home."

"So he was," said Bolton. "I didn't half enjoy the scrimmage for thinking of the agonies you petticoats were suffering. Mother, how many feather beds were burnt to bring you and Mr. Craven round?"

Mrs. Lance was watching the servant on the box, and, without heeding Bolton's question, she said,—

"What can John and James have to whisper about? I wish they would not: it looks so mysterious."

Bolton knelt upon the seat, and touched the man's shoulder. The latter instantly turned, and exclaimed,—

"Will you please to look ahead, Sir?"

The young men leaned out, and then started to their feet.

"Don't be frightened," said Lord Charles ; "it's only a few pitmen standing in the road, resting after the fatigues of the day, no doubt. We'd better drive on as though we suspected nothing."

"Yes," said Bertha, "it is too late to go back. You are not afraid?" she asked, turning to her step-mother.

"Oh, no!" replied Mrs. Lance, looking the embodiment of fear, "I—I don't mind in the least."

"Hold your horses well in, without changing the speed," Lord Charles whispered to the coachman ; "and if we are molested, dash right on : we must think only of getting the ladies safely past."

Silently and motionlessly the group remained in the road until the horses were close upon them, then it awoke to action ; the harness was seized, the animals were violently stopped, and the silence was broken by acrimonious epithets heaped upon Lord Charles, which, being more expressive than choice, need not be repeated here.

"Ruffianly cowards!" was his greeting in return; "you know we are powerless because of the ladies' presence. Drive on, John: lash into the fellows."

The coachman obeyed, and the excited horses plunged themselves free, and darted forward; but though their progress was no longer impeded, they were not free of the pitmen, who, clinging to the carriage, continued to threaten its inmates, and, running by the side, discharged handfuls of stones and gravel at the object of their hatred. These sometimes missed their aim, and though Lord Charles bore a sharp stroke on his own face, he lost all command of himself as a heavier stone than usual fell on Bertha's hand, and made her shrink with pain, although she uttered no cry.

"You brutes!" he exclaimed, "to fight defenceless women. Stop the horses, John! let me get out—let me get out!"

"Not if I know it," said Bolton, pulling him forcibly back, as he attempted to climb down over the side. "You would be torn to pieces: and much good that would do. Give 'em their heads, John; this speed must tell on our friends, soon."

It did: one by one the brawny hands relaxed their hold, the angry faces dropped into the rear, and the rapidly increasing distance prevented the showers of stones that continued to be hurled after them, from doing any more mischief. But now arose another danger, from the horses, who, maddened by the tumult, were fairly uncontrollable. The heavy vehicle was dragged violently from side to side, over deep ruts and round sharp turnings, oscillating as it rolled in a way that threatened momentarily to upset.

"Out of the frying pan, &c.," cried Bolton: "hold on again, Charley!"

Mrs. Lance had quietly fainted away at the first, and now lay in blissful ignorance of this new danger ; while Bertha, who had bravely borne her own wound without a murmur, burst into tears at the sight of the blood starting from the scratch on Lord Charles's face.

"Here's a nice situation for a young man of tender years," Bolton continued. "My ma is in a swoon, my sister in hysterics, no feathers at hand. My friend in a gory agony, and myself nowhere ; unless jeopardy has a latitude and longitude of its own. For Heaven's sake, pull those beasts in !"

"Our wristies is well-nigh pulled hoff, Sir," was the reply : "their mouths is like iron ; if we can guide 'em safe 'ome, that's all we can do. You sit firm ; please God, we'll take it out of 'em up the 'ill."

As Bolton turned to reassure his sister, he saw that his attention was quite unneeded ; Lord Charles, perfectly overcome by the sight of her tears, was bending over her, calling her his "dearest Bertie," and imploring her to cease crying for his sake ; he had taken possession of the wounded hand, too, and after carefully removing the little glove, was fondly kissing the torn and crimsoned scar, which contrasted with the smooth whiteness of the pretty rounded fingers. This treatment seemed scientific, for her sobs grew faint and fainter as the sugared epithets were bestowed more lavishly upon her. The perilous jolting of the carriage was also of service, for it rendered further support necessary ; and Bolton, as he spoke to his mother, who was beginning to show signs of recovery, saw Miss Bertie's head in close proximity with some one's epaulettes : but as she met her brother's eyes, it was instantly withdrawn and held very erect, with a due regard to rigid propriety and maidenly dignity. The amount of collar work required to surmount the precipitous hill of

Spireton was something considerable ; and as the Manor steeds were but ordinary animals, their fire was spent by the time they had climbed half the steep ascent ; so, when the top was reached, they allowed themselves to be stopped, and went the rest of the way in their ordinary quiet jog-trot.

At dinner Bolton gave a wonderful version of the perils they had escaped. Bertha looked very interesting with her arm in a sling, and the colour flew to her neck and brow when her brother asked her for her torn glove ; professing he wanted to preserve it as a proof of the sanguinary nature of the foe.

Lord Charles seemed to share her embarrassment, for in answer to Mr. Craven's inquiry whether he should recognise any of their assailants again, he said,—

“ Primrose : sixes I should think.”

“ I tell you what,” said Bolton, afterwards, to Nelly ; “ I've gone through a great many tender scenes on my own account, but never under such trying circumstances as that : if I could have made myself scarce by any means short of suicide, I'd have done it. Bertha will never be Miss Lance, my dear, unless you marry Johnny at once. Mark my words ! If anyone had told me Bertha could have looked so spooney as she did, I would not have believed it.”



CHAPTER IX.

A NOVEL STUDY

THERE was plenty of business to employ the new Member for some days. He refused to take any notice of the rioters; and his clemency was duly appreciated, for he was allowed to ride over the heath at all hours without meeting with any further annoyance: indeed, in a day or two, the sullen averted faces of the pitmen when they unavoidably encountered him, learned to return his good-natured smile and respond to his kindly greeting.

Yet he was ill at ease, for ever since their dangerous drive from Dulton, Bertha had avoided him; and though he blamed himself for not asking for an interview, he dreaded lest it should bring him disappointment. Passion argued, where was the danger of such a thing? had she not suffered his embrace, and listened to his words of love? But reason coldly argued, she was not herself on that occasion, her nerves were weakened by fatigue and alarm: it was natural that she should accept his sympathy and kindness: but only as from a friend. Thus he alternated between doubt and hope, overlooking his own personal attractions, his rank, easy fortune and fame; and while noticing the flush on her cheeks as his hand

met hers, morning and evening, he literally trembled before the simplicity of her girlish dignity.

He had passed his early manhood in active service abroad, where there was no female society of his own countrywomen, and his ideas of the fair sex were in consequence rather too highly exalted. English domestic life had been till now unknown to him since his boyhood ; no wonder, therefore, that he at once fell captive at the feet of the fair young English maiden, who scorned all arts, and whose beauty was entirely that of nature, while her mind was as pure as the sweet air of her native place.

While debating with himself and ministerpreting her avoidance of seeing him alone, he suddenly bethought himself of asking counsel of some one of experience in such matters ; but where was that some one to be found, and who was there that could be trusted ? Certainly not Bolton ; and he had no other intimate acquaintance within reach. He was sitting in the library as the thought entered his mind, and his eyes, raised in perplexity, fell on the well-filled book-shelves. Surely they were mutely offering the required assistance ; in their pages might he not find some Strephon in a like dilemma, whose modest assurance might guide *his* faltering accents ?

The works of fiction in the libraries of the present day are totally dissimilar to those of forty or fifty years ago. Mythology then usurped the place now rightly occupied by nature, and the unclassical reader was obliged to content himself with only half comprehending what he read, or be restricted to his weekly newspaper. For those whose education was of still more limited tether, tales were written where coarseness was mistaken for wit ; and young people openly read and criticised

works which are now carefully locked away by judicious parents, for fear of the minds of their offspring being polluted by them.

But refinement is not necessarily purity. In those pages, the conversation between lovers is always prefaced with "Sir" and "Madam;" the gentleman making his remarks on bended knee, the lady bashfully turning away as he attempts to kiss her reluctant hand. A harmless kiss in the dark, or a squeeze of the soft fingers, were indiscretions quite beneath these exalted personages. How such stilted characters ever unbent sufficiently to marry is an inexplicable mystery! Fortunately we need not believe all we read. Yet notwithstanding the propriety of their behaviour, they could listen to conversations that would not now be tolerated in decent society, and with *éclat*, play practical jokes, which would now condemn a man to solitary confinement in jail.

Then there was a villain capable of the blackest crimes, and generally drawn much more interesting than the faultless hero to whom he was a foil. The wicked scenes and the virtuous reflections are pleasantly alternated, and at the end of some seven or eight volumes, the stern parent is struck with repentance, or the monster of iniquity becomes an angel of light. Titles and riches unexpectedly shower down upon persecuted innocence, improbability reaches a climax, and the curtain falls on a millennium of wedded bliss.

Perched on the steps, and as he hoped unobserved, Lord Charles consulted volume after volume of these well-thumbed novels. It was a task of greater length than he imagined, for as he opened into interesting parts, he was led on until he became regardless of time, and lost in a labyrinth of villainy and affection.

"Where do you think Charles spent this afternoon?"

said Bolton, in full after-dinner conclave that same day. "On the book-steps among the novels, with Richardson under one arm, Fielding under the other, Smollett in his hand, and little Burney on his knee! What's up, Charley? I saw you, though you didn't see me!"

"I never read *Evelina*," was the steady reply; "works of fiction, or indeed of any kind, are so difficult to get when one is on foreign service. A copy of *Camilla* by some chance got into our mess, I recollect, but when it came round to me it was scarcely legible from dirt; that and the smell of garlic, which hangs about everything in Spain, completed my disinclination to try to decipher it; so I passed it on."

Mrs. Lance said, with gentle irony,—

"You are quite behind the age. Nowadays we get all our conversation from books: no one thinks of making an original remark; quotations from the literature of the day, with quick application of scenes from its pages to passing events, furnish sufficient food for our minds: we all read the same magazines, and one set of ideas does for a whole community. In my youth, old age was supposed to have acquired a fund of knowledge and experience, and was consulted and listened to with deference; but I am afraid that now elderly people are considered as good for nothing but to make their wills and die as soon as possible."

"Oh mother, mother!" cried Bolton, "your digestion must be greatly out of order!"

"I am sure you are right to a certain extent," said Lord Charles, without noticing the interruption. "When I returned to England, people seemed to be speaking enigmatically. They knew nothing of Spain, and when speaking of the Peninsula, seemed to consider it as a remote settlement *somewhere*: indeed, few can even pronounce

correctly the names of battles we have just won ; but mention a novel, a new play, or cards ! and one is overpowered with talk. I am seriously thinking of editing a dictionary of the prevailing terms and topics now in vogue in polite circles—to be published quarterly. I think it would be a boon to my brother ignoramuses who have spent the last four or five years abroad.”

“Well done !” exclaimed Bolton, who never liked to remain long silent ; “you must be descended from Mentor. Make it a magazine, and introduce essays upon the frivolity of the present state of society : you could also give chapters on politics, theology, and general science ; though I am afraid they would not be read by anyone in genteel life. How I hate that odious word genteel !”

“And,” said Nelly, “you could also give hints to poor stupids, and helps to country cousins ! Don’t you know it is a sure sign of approaching age and decay of intellect to refuse to progress with the age, and to declare the inferiority of the present to the past ?”

“Therefore,” cried Bolton, taking up his sister’s argument, “as approaching age cannot be your failing, it must be decay of intellect ; which generally evinces itself by concentrating all its weakening energies on one subject, and in being utterly powerless to follow any other matter. Before I pronounce hopeless insanity, I shall, however, give you a fair trial, and if I find that your looks, actions, thoughts, and wishes, all converge to one centre, then I——my dear Bertie, is your hand painful ?”

Bertha continued to eat her strawberries without looking up or replying to her tormentor ; while Nelly exclaimed, half in jest half in earnest,—

“Of all the disagreeable, interfering boys I ever met you are the worst. I really wish sailing orders would

arrive at once. Small boys like you are neither expected nor required to talk in the presence of their elders and superiors."

"Indeed!" he answered, rising scornfully from his seat, which was generally the arm of his step-mother's chair, where he delighted to balance himself to the momentary alarm of its occupant; "as for my elders I see plenty of them, but of superiors I recognise but two;" and he looked from his father to Mrs. Lance. "England is all very well in some respects, but if it studied its real welfare, it would yearly gag a few of its young women, and keep them in their proper places—that is, in dutiful and *silent* attendance upon their male relations."

"Thank you, dear! it's really very kind of you to interest your mighty intellect in us poor weak women; but don't waste your precious time on our account. Do sit down. I fear your noble limbs will be fatigued. Can I run and procure you any refreshment? I can't think why we exist at all. You would get on so much better without us, would you not?"

Pursued by his sister's laughter, he beat a hasty retreat, and solaced himself with the soothing companionship of his short black pipe.

"Now that meddlesome youth has departed," said Nelly, "let us settle about your proposed ball at Dulton, Lord Charles."

"Then I'll leave you to it," said Mr. Lance; "only remember if Mr. Charles gives it at all, it must be for his constituents of all classes; or, instead of satisfaction, it will cause nothing but dissension and discontent."

"Oh, all right, papa," said Nelly, "everyone is to be invited; we shall have the two large rooms at the Lion knocked into one, all sorts of refreshments and supper, and you will have to dance with all the old ladies."

The squire shook his head.

"It will be no end of trouble," he said; "don't count upon any assistance from me." And he left them.

"Dear old fellow," cried Nelly, "I'm glad he's gone. Now, Mrs. Lance, here is a pencil and paper; let us go to work in earnest."

"At those books?" cried Bolton, the next morning, entering the library and finding his friend again absorbed in novel-reading. "Really, you are as bad as Nelly, or her apt pupil the little Methodist. Leave that trash, there's a good fellow; you know we proposed to be at Dulton at eleven: you shouldn't undertake such an affair as a ball without making up your mind for lots of trouble."

"Preach away! and when you arrive at thirdly, I'll put on my riding boots: there's plenty of time, and I don't know yet whether the supper is to be eaten sitting or standing."

"Standing, of course; Nelly says so, and she's an old campaigner: leave her alone for knowing the right thing to do at balls. But do come; we shall keep them all waiting. Roger Frampton rode by half an hour ago."

"Oh! then we are safe not to have his delectable society going, at any rate. You'll find it no easy thing to get rid of that young hopeful: did it ever strike you that he is flying at higher game than politics?"

Bolton's face betrayed his anger and suspicions.

"I would not harbour such a humiliating thought," he replied, passionately: "luckily Helen is too calculating to disgrace herself, but if I thought otherwise I would horsewhip the fool's life out of him."

"Don't excite yourself: it was but a momentary idea. Your sister can't help his admiration, neither can you resent it: a cat may look at a queen, you know."

"It is no laughing matter. That confounded *mésalliance* of Vyvianne's brought these people about us. What on earth have we to do with his low connections? We are ruining that poor girl, too; teaching her to despise her own flesh and blood."

"You speak like a book: but you forget that Vyvianne's mother's sister's aunt's mother-in-law's step-mother's cousin is a near relation of yours; and as I am connected with you through my father's uncle's half-sister's daughter-in-law's brother being uncle to your step-mother, it appears to me that Vyvianne's marriage also connects us both with Miss Constance and her 'low relations,' as you call them."

"You are not annoying me in the least with such unfounded reasoning," he answered. "The child is well enough; I don't object to own her *now*: in fact, I like and pity her sincerely; but wait a few years, and she will be a nice specimen of Mrs. Gittens's style, overlaid with Nelly's tinsel. What's bred in the bone will——"

"Hush!" came warningly from Lord Charles.

Bolton turned and saw Constance standing in the doorway.

"Did you hear what I said?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied, just as openly, "but I don't care; and," she added, composedly, though her mouth was compressed, and there was an angry spot on each cheek, "your sisters wish to see you and Lord Charles before you start."

The latter sprang off the steps, and glad to escape the dilemma, instantly ran off to obey the summons. She would have followed, but Bolton caught her frock, and, assuming the freedom of a brother, he said,—

"You must forget it all. You know I do not mean any unkindness to you personally."

"I forgive you," she replied; "because anything you say makes no impression on me."

"Hem! What book is that in your hand?"

"The sequel to the *Sorrows of a Lonely Heart*. Oh! it is delightful," and she forgot everything but its merits. "I have just finished, and then I will ask Nelly if you can have it."

He threw himself into a chair, and laughed so heartily that she became excessively angry and indignant.

"I forgot to whom I was speaking," she exclaimed; and courteseying ironically—on the "lonely heart" model, no doubt—she turned away. But Bolton again arrested her, and holding her at arms' length, he surveyed her in the same spirit of curiosity with which he would have regarded some curious foreign animal. So strange a mixture of the child and woman completely puzzled him. She bore his gaze unflinchingly, till Nelly's voice came ringing down the corridor.

"Bolton, when you have done flirting with Constance, come here!"

Constance tossed her head disdainfully as he motioned her to listen:

"Flirting!" she repeated with scorn; "as if I should dream of flirting with a boy like you."

Bolton's only comment was a fresh burst of laughter.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, as he followed her to the drawing-room. "Women are rare animals, especially at your age; they should not be allowed to go loose: they are either stupid without being reserved, or pert without being witty: pert women should be strangled."

There was a warm debate going on in the drawing-room.

"Come in and help me," cried Lord Charles, as Bolton appeared at the door; "I am promising every-

thing, against my conscience, because I am in the minority and afraid to differ from so many ladies."

"Hearers are wanted," Bolton exclaimed. "What is it they want you to promise? Compulsory oaths are not binding."

"I protest against your interference," said Nelly. "What can a middy know of ball-room etiquette?"

"Etiquette," he retorted; "there won't be much of that at a Dulton hop, I fancy! I don't see why there should be any fuss: what can there be to arrange or dispute about? The thing is simple enough; everyone will dance with anyone, and when we are tired we shall leave off; there you are——"

"Of course," said Bertha, "of course we shall, on this occasion, dance with everyone; excepting——"

"Excepting the tradespeople," added Lucy Craven, who formed one of the private committee of ladies.

"There!" cried Bolton, executing a pirouette as he spoke, "I knew you petticoats would spoil all with your exceptions; now look here, girls——"

"Bolton, hold your tongue," Nelly said, rather tartly.

"Go and order the horses round," exclaimed Lord Charles, and he quietly turned Master Bolton out of the room. In a few minutes he joined him at the front door, and mounting their horses the two young men started for Dulton.

"Well?" said Bolton.

"Well!" repeated the other, "it's all right. I put the plain facts of the case before them in judicious terms—excuse me, but you are too precipitate with ladies—and Miss Bertie instantly saw the necessity of *Liberté, Egalité, et Fraternité* for 'one night only;' and now they are all quite looking forward with pleasure to the novelty of dancing with Jones's assistant, and the pickled butcher."

"I can't think how you brought them to agree with you," said Bolton reining his rough pony closer to his companion. "In my opinion, women and men-o-war's men both require the same treatment, cat-o'-nine-tails first, and reasoning afterwards."

"Oh, Miss Bertie is so sensible. She——"

"Allow me to remind you that the sensible Bertie was the first to protest against dancing with the shopmen. The moon is at the full, I suppose. Ah! I hope you'll be better soon."

Lord Charles fully understood these innuendoes, and felt strongly disposed to lay his whip across the offender's shoulders; but the droll expression in the sailor's handsome countenance, beside his relationship to Bertha, forbade all hostile acts, and he contented himself with remarking,—

"May I suggest a strait waistcoat as a necessary addition to your costume?" while he added inwardly, "Confound these youngsters! they have nothing to do but watch other people. I'm sure no one could imagine I cared for Bertie, my conduct is so guarded. I wish he had an affair of his own to take his attention off me."

For some moments they cantered on without speaking, then Lord Charles exclaimed,—

"Lucy Craven is very pretty; you and she seem very friendly!"

"Yes, I used to be sweet upon her years ago; but she's engaged to that ass, young Harlowe!"

"Where is the charm in him?"

"Eight thousand a year is all the charm he has. When I congratulated Mrs. Craven, the old hypocrite said, 'Don't congratulate me. I assure you every marriage in our happy circle is a living death to me.' To my certain knowledge she all but asked Harlowe his intentions, and

has been angling for him for a year or more. I suppose she balances his weakness against his settlements."

"I wonder the parson does not interfere!"

"The Reverend Johnny? He did at first; but without doing any good. Oh! they'll be as happy as ninety-nine couples out of a hundred."

"Pray how old are you?"

"One-and-twenty. What's that to you?"

"I am making a mental calculation, the result of which brings me to the conclusion that you must have been a remarkably precocious youth to have been sweet upon anyone some years ago."

Bolton put spurs to his pony's flanks, and quickened his pace, vouchsafing no notice of his companion's speech; Lord Charles, following, laughed as he watched his progress.

"Spurs to that wretched little beast!" he muttered. "Just like sailors: they know no more about riding than tailors."

Bolton had, undoubtedly, a peculiar style on horseback: he never mounted anything higher than the little shaggy animals called in Dorsetshire "heath croppers," and always started off at once in a canter, with loose reins, knees turned out, head far back, and a cheery smile of perfect content that was oblivious of care, past, present, and to come. As for supposing his pony required any assistance from him it never crossed his mind! His glance went everywhere but on the road before him, and if there were obstacles in the way, why, surely, he argued, that was the beast's look out, not his! Every time his father saw him start off in this break-neck manner, he prophesied some dire accident; but the grooms with whom, as with every servant in the establishment, he was a special favourite, were of a different opinion.

"Lor' bless 'ee, Zur !" old John would say, "I'll back Master Bolton there again' coming to grief: he do know what's what, he do. Be sure, he do turn corners uncommon sharp; but he's never taken aback, and that's everything: it's my mind that he'd as soon canter his pony down stairs as not."

Nelly said his mangy pony was a disgrace; why couldn't he ride a properly-groomed horse?

"Because I like mangy ponies better," was his reply; "when he's tired, I can give him a lift; and he does not mind scrambling through 'fuz' bushes or hedges." This was added purposely to alarm his father, and, having succeeded in doing so, he added, "Oh, don't mention it, Sir, I never go through any hedges but yours."

This took place one day when they had returned from a long ride. Mr. Lance was dismounting, but stopped midway in his course to the ground to wonder if his scapegrace son really did ride through his hedges.

Old John, who was holding his horse's head, reassured him.

"It's only his gamesomeness, Zur !" he said; "he's as pertickler as you be."

Bertha and Lord Charles were the last to draw up; they generally contrived it so; and though Mr. Lance might set off leading the way with his youngest daughter at his side, there was always some distant landmark to arouse the stranger's curiosity, and no one could make him understand the country so clearly as Bertha: he was stupid and short-sighted, until the others, tired of trying to explain, passed on; but she was too polite to leave him alone in his ignorance. However, the squire never thought it strange until to-day.

As his daughter reined her horse in, he offered to assist her down; but her companion had already dis-

mounted, and pressed before him to perform that duty himself. Then, as he stood aside, and carelessly looked on, it struck him that something beyond civility prompted the leisurely way of disengaging the reins from her white, gloved hands : something beyond friendship beamed in her downcast and his upturned eyes ; and when at last the young man received the light, graceful form in his arms, the descent seemed to be quite a long and perilous journey, so slowly and carefully was it performed. She used to spring down without *any* assistance, but now she appeared as much impressed with the dangers and difficulties of the transit as Lord Charles.

Poor Mr. Lance ! his children were fated to enlarge his ideas : he glanced towards old John, and saw him trying to hide a smile while fondling his young mistress's horse ; so pushing his hat further off his brow, he entered the house in utter perplexity to consult his wife.

Mrs. Lance astonished him still more—of course she had noticed the young people's behaviour—and calmly told her husband that, as there could be no objection to their marriage, on either side, he could do nothing but let things take their natural course ; and gradually he composed himself sufficiently to eat his dinner without appearing to notice the young lord's attention to Miss Bertie.

The day before the Dulton ball, the middy made a grand discovery—he learnt the reason of his friend's constant novel-reading ! By hiding behind the library screen, while Lord Charles—perched on his favourite post, the book steps, and never imagining whose observant eyes were on him—devoured the “trash,” as Bolton called all light literature, and indulged in sighs, which taxed to the utmost all his observer's self-command, Bolton found a clue to the mystery.

No sooner had the first dressing bell called the student away, than Bolton sprang to the vacant place, and commenced a strict scrutiny of the books which possessed the power of plunging the reader into unwonted sighs and oblivion of all around. Only those volumes dedicated to the tears and trials of hapless lovers exposed to numberless misfortunes and vicissitudes had been misplaced, and of these Bolton's quick eyes soon discovered that only the concluding volumes had been touched; they opened easily at the "declarations," which were made sometimes in the fourth, sometimes not until the seventh book of the story: though in one instance the author had kindly married the hero and heroine at an early stage of the plot, that he might introduce a numerous and pattern progeny rising up to bless the model parents.

With brows knitted in perplexity, Bolton made these observations, but could not understand why book after book opened on corresponding subjects; here a leaf was doubled down, there a slip of paper marked the page. At length the truth flashed upon him: "I have it," he cried, and, quickly replacing the volumes, he leapt off the steps, and in sudden ecstasy executed a series of double shuffle, and other eccentric steps not usually taught by dancing masters. The rustle of a passing dress made him spring to the door, and seeing Nelly going towards the drawing-room, he caught hold of her, and with a pantomimic entreaty for silence, he drew her into the room; where, after looking into all the corners, and carefully closing the door, he completed her amazement by turning a somersault.

"Really," she exclaimed, "are you mad?"

"Very nearly. I have discovered the richest thing! What *do* you think he's after?"

“He? Who?”

“Charles! haven’t you wondered why he doesn’t speak out? I can tell you the reason.”

Helen started. Why was her brother so excited and mysterious? were they all mistaken after all? was *she* the object of Lord Charles’s love? was his attention to Bertie only one of the inconsistencies of the malady? Her heart, with all its experience, palpitated, as these thoughts arose: why should Bolton call her to hear unless she was the most deeply interested? So she exclaimed,—

“Do tell me, dear Bolton, and be quick; I must rush to the drawing-room.”

A few words explained his real or fancied knowledge, and completely overthrow her egotistical hopes; but while she listened, and examined the tell-tale books, her disappointment, keen as it was, entirely gave way to her amusement.

“What an ass he must be!” added Bolton; “he is the last fellow on earth I should have imagined afraid of speaking to a girl; but mind you don’t betray me.”

He wondered the more when, during dinner, he listened to Lord Charles’s conversation—clear, concise, and evincing a depth of thought and knowledge more uncommon amongst the aristocracy then than it is now. Lord Spireton, who was one of the guests, had been the friend of Pitt, and was himself no mean orator, courted the young man’s attention, and backed his opinions. Such a combination of strength and weakness was but another of the anomalies of the human character.

Mr. Bolton Lance had yet to learn that the bravest and wisest are yet vulnerable, that the veriest tyrant has his soft moments and owns a superior tyranny, and that the reins of the little smiling god of love are strong

enough to curb the fiercest natures. The bully of the bar in his gown and wig is a very different person when, in slippered ease, he listens meekly to his wife's anecdotes of Mary's impertinence and Johnny's chilblains; and though in court he dares to argue wrong against right, and blusters till he makes bewildered innocence commit perjury, at home he would not presume to appear weary of these twice repeated domestic grievances. And the man of learning who finds half the alphabet insufficient to initial his scientific honours, becomes silent, stupid, and apparently senseless before the witchery of a woman's smile.

Love is our first, as it is our latest sentiment; under its influence wrinkles soften into dimples, poverty appears plenty, foolish words the epitome of wit. What would become of suffering human nature without this inexhaustible treasure? Does not the man of eloquence with inspired tongue, or magic pen, think less of the admiring shout of thousands than of the one smile, the one "well done," that shall repay him amply for toil and trouble? The love that gilds our inner life has a brilliancy distinct from the fitful sun of public praise, just as the one voice hushed in the home circle, the one quiet grave, creates in the individual mind an agony far surpassing that caused by the greatest national calamity.

Bolton was vexed that his eldest sister had not shown greater excitement over his grand secret. "Just like women," he thought; "they take delight in doing the very contrary to what one expects." But Miss Helen was a prudent as well as a pleasant young lady, and kept her feelings out of the sight even of her nearest and dearest: and if she did in her inmost heart at this time wish Lord Charles back in his foreign prison, Bertie in

the school-room again, and her sailor brother far out at sea, she betrayed none of these wishes ; her vanity, both as to quality and quantity, was sufficient to enable her to bear, with outward equanimity at all events, even greater shocks than this. Hope never deserted her long, and “*Nil desperandum*” was her motto.





CHAPTER X.

AN UNCONSECRATED GRAVE.

BERTHA continued the morning studies with Constance, letting nothing interfere with the self-imposed task. Something told her she was loved, and she was happy in the consciousness, without seeking to have it confirmed. Not for worlds would she have breathed the thought to any human being ; it was a sacred blissful dream yet, and she shrank from its becoming a reality ; it was enough for her to read the fact in the tone of his voice, in the glance she yet feared to meet, in the lingering grasp of his hand ; the happy present was all-sufficient. So she strove to preserve her tranquillity by continuing her duties strictly and conscientiously ; and even Nelly did not fathom the depth of her sister's heart.

The summer weather was so delightful that the books were carried up to the top of the cliffs, where were the remains of an old encampment, and there, with the sea spreading limitless before them, the village nestling in the long valley, and the ever-changing cloud-shadowed heath stretching into dim distance behind them, they read and worked.

On the morning of the ball, however, the studies made but little progress. Bertie's tatting lay unheeded in her

lap, while her soft blue eyes followed the wheeling flight of the gulls as they alternately soared aloft, displaying their pure white breasts and snowy wings, and dropping straight down uttered their peculiar plaintive cry till they rested securely on the rippling water. Constance was thoughtful also, for she, too, was going to the ball, and her aunt had required so much coaxing before she would give her consent, that the difficulty of gaining the boon had of course greatly enhanced the interest with which the young girl looked forward to its enjoyment.

Thus they both sat silently absorbed in their thoughts ; the loveliness of the scene, and the heat of the summer sun, affording a reasonable excuse for idle contemplation. Presently the sound of voices floated upwards and attracted their attention ; it came from the plantations that stretched upwards from the Manor gardens ; there was Nelly's light laugh, and Lucy Craven's clear girlish tones ; and Bertha heard deeper notes too, that brought the colour to her face, and dispersed the languor from her eyes.

"They are coming up here," cried Constance, starting to her feet, "I see them passing through the grove-gate, there ; Nelly, Lucy, Lord Charles, and that tiresome Bolton. I am glad Lord Charles is coming ; doesn't he look handsome when he smiles ?"

A shout from Bolton told that he saw them, and on they all came, panting up, and joined the (supposed) students.

"Getting roses for to-night !" exclaimed Bolton. "Constance, you'll owe the treat to me : it was hard work persuading Mrs. Gittens."

"I admire your impudence," cried Lord Charles, throwing himself on the soft thymy grass. "It was I who fought for you, Constance ; your aunt argued that

sensible folks ought to be in bed at that time of night, instead of kicking their legs about and showing their shoulders in public-houses—I declare those were her words, Miss Lance. I couldn't get in a word at first, until I began to cough, and tap my chest, and mutter about the damp of my cell when I was imprisoned ; that raised her compassion, and for fear of making me exert myself too much, she gave in entirely."

Constance was on excellent terms with all the gentlemen who visited the Lances, and especially with Lord Charles ; she retained her early predilections for military men, and devoutly believed in that old-fashioned maxim—now obsolete almost—that an officer was necessarily also a gentleman.

"I did not imagine for one moment," she said, "that Aunt Gittens would consent ; she told me when you had gone, that 'she couldn't refuse you nothing, for you seem to have one foot in the grave.'"

"Oh ! how dreadful," cried Nelly ; "if the other foot follows, while you are with us, we'll bury you here with old Sir Giles."

"What !" he exclaimed, "is that flat stone a tombstone ? I thought it was a table in the wilderness for the express convenience of young lady's books."

"You heathen !" cried Bolton, "it is a real grave stone."

"What pagan chose this unconsecrated resting-place ? Miss Bertie, am I to believe it covers a grave ?"

He was accustomed to appeal to her on all doubtful points.

"Yes, indeed !" she replied, "and there is a romantic story concerning it. Who will tell it ?"

"I !" the speaker was, of course, Bolton. "I'll tell the tale as it was told to me, by the ghost of the very

individual who has been irreverently termed a pagan, because his bones rest in this delightful spot instead of some mouldy dismal churchyard ; but unless you girls promise faithfully not to interrupt me, I won't go on."

"I warn you all," said Nelly, "if *he* tells it, we shall need all our patience ; so first let us make ourselves comfortable."

"You are envious and jealous of my superior rhetoric," said her brother, seating himself in the most ridiculous attitude he could devise. "Now I begin :—

"In the year fifteen hundred and—oh ! will some one oblige me by telling me in what year Mary of sanguinary memory—please to remark how carefully I avoid all words that might affect the ladies' nerves—departed this life ? In the year fifteen hundred and—fifty-eight ? Thank you, Bertie, dear : how pleasant it must be to be a *classical* scholar with a head for dates !"

"Oh," cried Nelly, "if you will not try to talk sense, I shall tell the story myself."

"I thought I was admirably adapting my language to the capacity of my weaker brethren," he rejoined, "and you have no business to interfere—just as I was going on swimmingly, too. Are we not like people in books ? This is how we should be described, 'Reclining on the brow of a sunny cliff, the blue firmament sparkling above, the many twinkled smile of ocean glancing beneath, the——'"

"Now, really," cried Miss Craven, "this is too absurd."

"Oh, Lucy ! by the memory of bygone hours of happiness," he said, turning up his eyes, and laying his hand on his heart ; "by the memory of those moonlight walks and endearing—oh ! I forgot we are not alone. Well, as I was saying, or rather as I was about to say—Charles !

it is no laughing matter, and such levity is not respectful to the ashes of an ancestor who——”

At a sign from Nelly, Lord Charles seized the offender, and pinned him down, refusing to release him until he promised to behave rationally.

“I promise,” he said, at last; “not from awe of *you*, but your biceps, which are in capital condition, old fellow;” and shaking himself free, he cleared his voice with a hem! that would seriously have injured ordinary lungs, and began again.

“Now I will a tale unfold. Look behind you right over the Manor, and in mid distance you behold Dulton, so named from its extraordinary gaiety. You can easily distinguish the gray buildings round the square tower of the church, and the smoke that rendering it ‘chiar’ obscur,’ gives to the *tout ensemble* a mellowness that reminds one of a landscape of somebody’s—I forget whose: but I flatter myself I have said enough to convince you I am thoroughly acquainted with the technicalities of fine art. I suppose you can also distinguish a gleaming line close round the town, which is the river Dul. You may follow its zigzag course right through the plain, till it loses itself, or finds itself—for I really don’t see why we should use one word more than the other—in the great lake to the right; and if you were gifted with vision sufficiently sharp to pierce through that low range of sandstone hills, you would perceive the lake itself mingle its waters with the ocean.

“Now bring your gaze back past Dulton, along that hard, white road, by those bright pools of water, so conspicuous in the dark heath, till you rest it upon a conical clump of pines. Oh! am I not as good as a living map, or a walking guide to knowledge? only a good deal more practical.”

"The whole plain is dotted with bright pools, and round clumps of pines," said Lord Charles, "and I see no less than four white roads."

"Don't expect me to find you with sense as well as amusement. I mean the road nearest the river, that runs past the little white church in the low meadows, about three miles to the left of Dulton."

"Oh, yes ! now I see which you mean ; there is the clump, and there are some plantations, and a building of some sort, is there not ?"

"Exactly so, a ruin—a romantic ruin—permit me a moment to admire my language. Well ! as you are on the right scent at last, I will begin ; or at least, go on, cosily."

"Your last chance," cried Nelly : "one more impertinent remark, and we will leave you."

"All right. In the year 1558, the miserable reign of the priest-ridden Mary I. came to an end, and that of her sister, the glorious Bess—I fancy she was a very disagreeable female though, in private life—commenced. (I'll wait for any of you to get paper and pencil : it is a pity such choice terms should be lost to posterity.) That far-off gray ruin was at that time a thriving monastery (or monkery, or convent, or a mixture of all, I dare say), and its long-robed inhabitants ruled despotically over the entire neighbourhood. Their rule was generally allowed and tolerated by all, with few exceptions ; the principal unbeliever being old Giles Lance, the lord of the manor.

"A jolly old toper was Sir Giles ; he had accompanied Henry the Eighth to the Field of the Cloth of Gold, and if you search diligently in the painted memorial of that costly entertainment, now decorating one of the state rooms of Hampton Court Palace, you may see him there represented becomingly arrayed in a tight jerkin of white

and gold, and scarlet pantaloons. He is apparently bestriding the ears of the king's charger, while that worthy is, to all appearance, suspended in mid air in the arms of the King of France ; but making due allowance for the perspective (or the want of it), Sir Giles is really walking a little in advance of the royal steed.

"As Henry sobered with advancing age, so did his squire, and when the former exchanged his throne for a grave, Giles left court, and came quietly down here to be out of the way of the human bonfires ; which did not tally with his religious scruples.

"He escaped Mary's fiery regard by a miracle, for the fathers (nice *fathers* ! more like thankless sons, *I* think) never ceased to petition for punishment on him for holding such heretical opinions, and for his house and lands to be made Church property ; but during the queen's neglected youth, Giles had shown her some kindness, and, with all her faults, Mary never forgot a service received in that troubled period. So she ignored his existence and the monks' petitions, and he remained unmolested. His banner, that had waved in many a bloody struggle, was hung, where it still hangs, over the dais in the inner hall, and beneath its drooping folds the old knight dozed away his shortening days ; undisturbed, save by the tinkle-tinke of the angelus, or matins, or vespers, or something that was perpetually ringing from the little chapel in the valley down there—by-the-bye, Lucy, it is now Mr. Johnny's tithe-barn.

"I dare say he was a crabbed old fellow ; for though he fed the poor bountifully every day, it was only because the monks gave liberally to all that liked to attend at the convent gates, and the cloak of charity was assumed to hide his attempts to outshine their popularity : for he never rode past the image of the Virgin on Dulton Cross,

without shaking his heavy whip at it, and muttering a—well, not a blessing exactly, on the whole papistical crew.

“One day, on the wings of the wind the sound of Dulton bells floated through the open door of our old house, and wakened the old knight from his after-dinner snooze. First it came with a deep sorrowful boom, and then with merry clanging peal. Mary was dead, and Elizabeth the Protestant reigned exultingly in her stead.

“The old squire was heavy with the brewings of three score and ten Octobers, and it was difficult for him to reach the back of his stout Flemish gelding; but at this news he sprang nimbly up from his oaken settle, dashed his pipe to the rush-strewn floor, and——”

“Gently, gently,” cried Lord Charles: “how about a pipe in 1558? Besides, you said he was taking a nap.”

“Ah, well, a mere *lapsus linguæ*. No, now I recollect, it wasn’t a pipe—it was his pocket-handkerchief, only I believe he did not own one; in fact, he didn’t dash anything down, but he swore a good broad oath or two of King Harry’s fashioning, and called for his horse to carry him to hear the joyous proclamation at Dulton.

“The state of the road between here and there was decidedly inferior to what it now is; the journey was then performed in nothing less than an hour and a half, and that was considered rather fast travelling. Old Giles did it cleverly within that time, and he shouted with the loudest, and threw his cap the highest on the market square as he cried with honest thankfulness,—

“‘God save Queen Bess!’

“He drank a few cups in her honour, and a few more in wishing confusion to her enemies—which meant the Roman Catholics generally, and the Spireton monks in particular. A good old custom had this good old knight, and one which he said prevented his making a beast of

himself. His jerkin was fastened by so many buttons—I'll say a dozen to keep within bounds. As he finished his first cup on his weekly visit to market, he unbuttoned the top button, and so on with every replenishing, until the open garment showed the soft fawn skin which, in lieu of a linen shirt, covered his brawny chest. At this point he fastened a button with every fresh bumper, and having thus reached the topmost, he would modestly cry that enough was as good as a feast, and with the easy conscience of a virtuous man, would wend his homeward way.

“So it was on this occasion ; he paid his reckoning to the host's, at the Lion, great, great, great grandfather, jested greatly about the uneasiness the turn of the tide would cause his cowed neighbours, and then rode cheerily out of the darkening town into the last rays of the setting sunlight.

“Those who watched him go cried, ‘There goes the good old squire,’ little thinking that his jolly voice would never again echo through the streets ; little surmising that he was astride of the pale horse who has no earthly stable. He rode on, and his bulky figure stood out in bold relief against the bright evening sky as he passed over the brow of yonder hill, where we were so nearly spilt after the election. Charley, that dying glow was his funeral torch lighting him to Hades. As his lodge-keeper closed the gate behind him, she remarked that he swayed unsteadily in the saddle, and mentally determined he had indulged too freely in Dulton ale.

“But the excitement had been too much for his failing strength, and the morning sun shone on the dead body of old Giles ; his soul had joined the shades of the three defunct Dame Lances, and of the eight stout sons whose bones were whitening on as many fields of battle. There

was, however, one son still alive who had been exiled, but who could now return to his native land without fear. He just arrived in time to partake of the dilemma all his father's friends were in, as to where the old knight was to find burial. And now comes the tug of war. The monks had still possession of Dulton Church, and they declared the wretched old heretic should not sleep with his orthodox forefathers. What was to be done? The son, who was a true chip of the old block, soon showed them. He in his turn declared that his father's bones would not rest in peace if they were laid within hearing of the monk's idolatrous masses, and he dug a grave up here under the blue sky, side by side with the British king (or Saxon, or Roman, or Danish, or perhaps neither one nor the other), but very possibly the old original King Cole himself, who is supposed to lie under this tumulus, with his favourites slumbering around him. And now I've said my little say, so will pursue the uneven tenor of my downward way."

So saying he deliberately lay down on the edge of the grassy slope, and rolled over and over to the bottom.

"Is it true?" asked Lord Charles, appealing to Bertie.

"The facts are," she replied; "the illustrations are peculiarly his own."



CHAPTER XI.

A WINNING BALL.

THE glories of the Bolton election ball yet linger in the memories of those who were fortunate enough to be present. Pinks as well as Blues were invited to "favour Lord Charles with their company," and many of the former pocketed their pride and "accepted with pleasure;" although Miss Frampton sternly commented upon such weakness of principle.

The old women of this day, who then flaunted in all their young bravery, yet speak rapturously of this grand event, which was to many of them the commencement of a new era in their lives; for under the genial influence of the ample supper and the music, many a John plucked up courage to whisper "the old, old story," and awoke next morning with the *agreeable* (?) consciousness that he had a splitting headache, and was an engaged man.

They yet remember how the worthy tradespeople sat demurely round the ball-room with its decorations of flowers and mottoed streamers, waiting till the hurrahs of the outside crowd and the rattle of wheels over the pavement before the inn, caused all eyes to turn from contemplating their neighbours' finery, in excited expectancy, towards the curtained entrance through which the "great folks" were about to enter.

The musicians—consisting of local amateurs—then hid the mugs of beer with which they had been whiling away the time of waiting, and struck up, “See, the conquering hero comes !” the drum being specially prominent ; and to this energetic, not to say deafening, movement, the young member, with Mrs. Lance on his arm, entered at the head of a large company, consisting of all the *élite* of the neighbourhood. Then mothers of families, to whom the idle waiting had been weary work, started briskly to their feet ; mouths and eyes opened wide, and significant “oh’s” and nudges marked their admiration, as their host and his friends, scattering smiles and gracious welcomes around them, passed on to the upper end of the room.

The Framptons from Spireton beheld Constance amongst the favoured train, and Roger declared the sight of that stuck-up little minx made him sick : in which observation his sisters perfectly acquiesced. Presently Lord Charles, with Miss Lance, placed themselves opposite each other at the head of a long double row of gay young people, and the band struck up a country dance. Helen was perfectly aware that etiquette alone made her thus prominent ; but there was some comfort in thinking that none of the lookers-on were equally knowing, and though her partner’s thoughts were evidently with his eyes on Miss Bertha, his words were addressed to her, and that was all she cared about.

Applause and admiration in any shape and from anyone was grateful to Miss Lance, and as she met the broad red hands and honest eyes of the farmers, and conversed with them on the relative virtues of red wheat and white, dissected the perplexed question of “turmut’s” *versus* mangold, considered the “runs” of the last season, and the chances for the next, their hearty homage and broad

compliments quite repaid her for the damage done to her dress by their clumsy movements.

But with the townspeople, success was much more difficult to attain. They were so accustomed to receive orders with bowing obsequiousness at the carriage-door, that it was anything but happiness now to have to go down the middle and up again in lively partnership with these very customers ; and, instead of offering their hands for acceptance as they met in the figure of the cotillon, they felt much more inclined to rub them professionally, and ask "any other article?"

All things considered, however, the evening passed on brilliantly ; the young ladies made themselves universally agreeable, and the young gentlemen were indefatigable in their exertions. Lord Charles led his partner, a stout lady tastefully dressed in red satinette trimmed with yellow gauze, to her seat, and stood by Nelly for a moment to thank her for dancing with Brown the butcher, and other eligibles of the same calibre.

"Don't thank me," she exclaimed, "I am quite enjoying myself ; it is the most entertaining evening I ever spent. My only difficulty is to refrain from shrieking at the sweet speeches in double *Darsch*."

"Bolton is behaving disgracefully," Lord Charles continued. "I heard him just now in the tea-room persuade a girl to put butter instead of cream in her tea, he declaring gravely that his sister always preferred it."

"What a shame ! but you must listen to this. You see that heavy-looking young man there, wiping his face with a red cotton handkerchief ; I danced with him, and he was so abashed that he could not speak. I tried him on every subject, from sheep to vetches, but he remained overpoweringly silent. At last, in despair, I admired the chandeliers—mentally concluding they were bought

at some sale in the year one ; when, to my intense surprise, his face instantly beamed with interest, and his impassioned eloquence burst forth in these immortal words,—

“Glad you like ’em, Miss ! Father blowed ’em !”

“How very good : but do look at your sister ; I am afraid she is doing too much.”

A little fat man, apparently overpowered with heat and nervousness, was soliciting her hand, and she was courtesying her consent with all the dignity of a princess.

“Look,” cried Nelly, “his head only reaches her shoulder, and she is actually talking and smiling ! I had no idea she would make herself so agreeable. You know she has a fair share of pride.”

“You are all so very kind,” he said, smiling. “Now I must go. After this, I think we may have our waltz, don’t you ?”

This waltz was to be the only exclusive dance of the evening, and had been held out as a reward for the young ladies’ affability. Bolton had patiently stood over the musicians day after day for weeks previously, drilling them to perform in unison for this one occasion. In vain he cried “*one*,” with a stamp for emphasis, and then urged them to get over two, three, quicker ; the time puzzled them, as the figure puzzled everyone else, and at last, he informed his sisters that their best plan would be to shut their eyes, and dance to mental music. He came up to Nelly in the next pause and said,—

“Now we are going to have our waltz. I have plied that big drum with strong ale all the night, hoping to finish him off before he finishes me ; but my last partner—a sweet little creature, who had evidently dined off onions—informed me that he is in the habit of drinking

twelve quarts at a sitting, so I have given him up in despair."

The waltz had but newly made its appearance in England, and was yet regarded by heads of families as the stepping-stone to vice and infamy: the enemy of virtue and modesty; but though wits wrote against it, and the pulpit denounced it as pernicious, it spread and gained ground daily. As yet it had not appeared in Dulton, and when the band struck up the old "*Trois Temps*," few knew what dance it prognosticated; but when Lord Charles suddenly proceeded to enclose Bertie in his arms, and to spin round and round in apparent frenzy, it required all the respect of many generations' growth to enable the worthy tenantry to sit quietly and behold such an outrage upon decency. But how much further were the lookers-on amazed, when Roger Frampton, whose college education comprised many branches of knowledge not entered in the professors' book, was seen to take like possession of Miss Lance, and, while all his compeers breathlessly and shamefacedly drew back, he, encircling her waist, and clasping her hand undauntedly, followed in the mad whirl.

Mrs. Frampton, who was ignorant of many of her son's accomplishments (this amongst the number), was made aware of his seemingly preposterous conduct by the "Oh, la's!" and "Well, if evers" of her friends. She pushed forward through the crowded circle, and when she saw "our Roger" familiarly embracing one whom she was accustomed to consider as far above her and hers, as the stars above the earth, her emphatic exclamation of "Oh, my!" but feebly expressed her feelings.

For a few moments she remained in nervous suspense, expecting to see Mr. Lance rush forward and angrily forbid such presumption; but as she beheld that gentle-

man not only calmly looking on, but evidently admiring the extraordinary evolutions, she began to be easier, and finally to rejoice in her son's performance. And ever after this "triumph of hedication," she forbore to make angry comments on his extravagance; for "hadn't he learnt to foot it with the best of 'em?"

And as Roger clasped Nelly's light figure close to his breast, as her scented curls brushed over his face and together they floated round and round in the giddy circle, hopes never to be realised, and vain dreams that must end in bitter awakening, filled his brain; and when Nelly complimented him on his dancing, and thoughtlessly expressed her enjoyment of it, she cared not, even if she guessed, how fierce was the flame kindling at his heart.

The dance was over, for a minute his arm continued to steady her, and then the delirious feelings had to be hushed and stifled as her brother came up; but Roger left her, bewildered by her fascinations.

"Did you ever see anything so wonderful?" she said, stopping her sister and Lord Charles.

"Yes," said Bertie. "I mean—what did you say?"

"Fancy Roger Frampton knowing how to waltz!" replied Nelly, without appearing to notice Bertie's very evident confusion.

But Bertha only laughed, and when Lord Charles left her to seek another partner, she coloured deeply as Nelly observed quickly that "Charles looked very flushed," and turned away.

Miss Lance's experienced eye led her to arrive at a conclusion that was not wrong, namely, that her sister had been listening to sweeter sounds than the Dulton band could furnish. Lord Charles's study amongst the novels had been in vain; he had neither knelt, nor im-

plored, nor gesticulated, and yet he had made his confession. Dread of being too precipitate, or of wounding her sensitive feelings, had been forgotten as he felt the flutter of her hand in his to-night—had lost itself in the depths of her confiding eyes. He said something in a jerky, spasmodic manner as they paused to recover breath; but the big drum had boomed close to their ears, as her lips parted in reply: yet although not a sound of her words was audible, he had looked in her face, and was content.

The drive home over the silent heath, with her fingers clasped in his, under the friendly cover of numberless wraps—the lingering pressure with which they parted in the twilight hall, while the others yawned their adieux—connected one dream of ecstasy with the other; and when he reached his chamber, he instantly dismissed his valet, and seating himself in the open window, continued the blissful thoughts which, like the approaching day, were dawning with roseate light upon his soul. From the garden beneath, sweet odours ascended from the dewy flowers as they swayed under the chilly breath of the dying night wind, offering incense with him, as it were, to the object of his devotion. The sea, brightening beneath the opening radiance of the eastern sky, sounded to him like the soft murmur of her voice; the starry eyes of the jasmine, clustering round the window, were no purer than her pure gaze, and the fresh beauty of the early morn, with all its fragrance and loveliness, reminded him of her youth and innocence.

With his senses outwardly and inwardly thus steeped in love, he sat wrapt in happy contemplation, till the sound of the gardener's scythe blended with the lark's matin song, the sea glowed like liquid silver in the bright sunlight, and the flowers raised their brilliant

heads in odorous, though mute, adoration of the radiant heavens; then the clattering hoofs of Bolton's pony, returning from the sailor's usual morning "freshener," reminded him of the lapse of time.

Presently Bolton, with his head well back, his stirrups untouched, and his reins twisted, cantered round the terrace, and having halloed under his sister's windows, came to arouse his friend; but Lord Charles only hailed the summons as a signal for rest, and (as even lovers require sleep) he sought his neglected pillow, and became oblivious of all other attractions until far into the day.

He had gained his election, and his bride; and when the engagement was announced, Nelly's congratulations were so naturally cordial, that even Bolton was deceived. When the sailor's leave expired, and he bade Helen good-bye, he added a caution respecting young Frampton.

"What do you mean?" was her remark.

"That men in his position are as dangerous as edged tools: yet you laugh and talk with him as you would to an equal."

"Really I'm so much obliged! Can't you compile a manual for the guidance of young ladies in polite society? You are so well fitted to give advice."

He turned away, saying, with a laugh,—

"Well, if he likes being fooled, it's no business of mine; only I object to a sister of mine being the acting instrument."

"Thank you; but be good enough to understand once for always, that he has sufficient sense to know I was polite to him only on political expediency. When you come back again, you will find him comfortably settled down with a Mrs. Clodhopper; and I——"

"Mrs. Johnny Craven."

She tossed her curls indignantly.



CHAPTER XII.

CHANCES AND CHANGES.



CAPTAIN VYVIANNE'S answer respecting his daughter's future education came at last. It was addressed to Constance: greatly to Mrs. Gittens's indignation, who thought that, as John had been at the trouble and expense of writing, he was at least entitled to the reply.

Constance read it silently, and then gave it to her uncle, saying,—

“Read it aloud, please uncle.”

And the minister read thus,—

“MY DEAR CHILD,

“The subject of Mr. Gittens's letter has for some time caused me much anxious consideration. Having heard a favourable account of your understanding, I write direct to you, as you are now of an age to act in a great measure for yourself. I therefore no longer address you as an unreflecting child.

“I suppose you are aware that my hasty marriage with your mother offended my relations; especially my father's two sisters, who took care of me from my infancy. *Their* coldness has long grieved me, and I have often wished for an opportunity of renewing our former

cordiality. My present inability to superintend your education seems to me a powerful motive for assuring them (by asking their advice in so important a matter) that I still have the highest respect for their experience and counsel, and I have by this mail written to them, stating the case minutely, and begging them to communicate with you. Whatever their decision is, you must strictly adhere to it; and if they recommend a school near them, and notice you in any way, I expressly enjoin you to behave so as to merit their regard, for much depends upon your conduct. If they continue their coldness, and decline to interfere in this matter, wait till you hear further from me; but if they make the slightest overtures of friendship, I desire you will meet them with every possible consideration and attention.

“Mrs. Lance has kindly promised, through her son, to assist you, in the event of your leaving your present home, in the matter of dress, &c. The Lances have, indeed, extended their cordial friendship from one generation to another, for some of the happiest days of my life were spent under their hospitable roof. *You* can never repay their kindness.

“Give my kind regards to Mr. and Mrs. Gittens. I trust you will properly assure them of your appreciation of their long attention to your welfare. I beg Mrs. Gittens will accept of some Indian pickles and a Cashmere shawl which I am forwarding, together with a few trifles for the ladies at the Manor, and your little self. I desire to hear from you by every mail, and remain,

“Affectionately yours,

“C. H. V.”

Strangely confused by this unexpected turn of affairs, half pleased at the prospect of a new life, and half sorry

at the thought of leaving old scenes and friends, Constance sat silently trying to realise the scheme, and hoping the cold mention of her dear homely uncle would pass unnoticed; but her aunt soon broke the silence which seemed to fall upon all, by crying,—

“Ah! he can’t have done with his humbug. Grieved, and affectionate, and anxious, indeed! I’d liked to have seen him writing it; grinning to himself, I’ll be bound, thinking how nicely he was doing us poor hignorants. He’s got all he can out of us, John, so bethinks him of his grandees! I know what he means about Betsy Jane showing us of her gratitude. La! bless me! does the man take us for ninnies, I wonder?”

John took out his handkerchief and wiped his eyes.

“Aunt and uncle,” cried Constance, standing between the couple, and clasping her uncle’s hand in hers, “I shall never forget you, never cease to love you. I shall not care for the grandest friends in the world, unless they let me come to see you very often. And see, uncle, very likely my aunts won’t have anything to do with me: it will be time enough to cry out when I’m hurt, uncle dear; won’t it, aunt?”

This was a long speech for Constance, who was not in the habit of expressing her feelings before Mrs. Gittens; but the tone of her father’s letter chilled her unconsciously, and the sight of her uncle’s emotion overpowered her dread of her aunt’s irony: yet, strange to say, the latter did not snap her up. She was actually touched by the girl’s simple assurance, and only answered quietly, lowering her eyes the while to hide the unwonted moisture,—

“Ay, you’re right: folk isn’t so keen as we was to take in stray relations from foreign parts; but you’re welcome to come and stay when you will, as long as

you leave your kickshaws and mounseering behind you."

"Thank you, aunt," she said, warmly : "now I'll run over to the Manor and tell them."

But they also had Indian letters, so hers was no news to them. Mr. Lance's was merely a recapitulation of Constance's, but Nelly's was private property. That young lady was full of delight, anticipating the present which was specially intended for her. She read the young girl's letter, but would see in it nothing but the tenderest paternal care.

"It strikes me," said Constance, "that we are making up to my aunts for what we can get."

"Bah ! don't be Utopian ; you can't live without money, and when they die, why shouldn't you have what they no longer want ? I think your papa is very unselfish and disinterested to wish to put you forward ; for they might leave him out of their wills, and place you there instead, you know."

"I don't want their money ; papa will take care of me."

"Don't be too sure ; he may marry again. Such things do happen, don't they, Mrs. Lance ?"

The latter laughed good-humouredly : "Captain Vyvianne is acting wisely," she said, "in trying to bring about a reconciliation with his aunts ; he certainly disappointed and disregarded their wishes, but he was very young at the time. However, the least you can do, Constance, is to submit to *his* decision of honouring theirs."

Two days later, the following letter reached Constance :

"King's Rest, Surrey.

"CONSTANCE SOPHIA,

"We both feel so flattered that our humble names should be considered suitable for the granddaughter of

a Methodist minister, that any irregularity in this writing must be attributed to the flutter of spirits thereby occasioned. Until the receipt of young Vyvianne's letter, we were scarcely aware of the existence of one who can confer upon us the honourable title of grand-aunts, and having lived so many years in blissful ignorance, we are content to remain unseen, if not unknown, by our new-found relative—yourself. We therefore need say no more than that we are our grand-niece's

“Most obedient humble servants,

“CONSTANCE AND SOPHIA VYVIANNE.”

Unmitigated rage and scorn were the girl's predominant feelings as she perused this affectionate production; such a passion of tears and wounded pride had not been roused since the days of her undisciplined Indian life. John and his wife, hearing her violent sobs, and seeing her convulsed features, thought she must have lost her father at the very least. She tossed the letter towards them to explain, and with indignant gestures bade them read it aloud; their calmness, as they felt relieved, caused her fierce passion to abate, especially when Mrs. Gittens calmly remarked,—

“Lor, bless me! is this all? Why, it's only what I expected from such high and mighty folk. I hope it'll teach you who are your *best* friends.”

John was highly pleased that his pet was left with him a little longer; for some time must elapse before the captain could send further instructions: he patted the bowed head, and cried coaxingly,—

“Come, come: there now, be a good girl, dooe now.”

In her wounded pride Constance was for returning the offending instrument to its authors, and Nelly encouraged

the idea ; but Mr. Lance's positive orders against the plan obliged them to give it up. The day was too short for the young ladies to express their disgust ; but the next morning's post brought a decided check to their sentiments in the shape of another letter from the same source : which, though written in the same upright crabbed hand, ran very differently, as follows :—

“NIECE VYVIANNE,

“Since my last communication we have changed our minds, and are now willing to make your acquaintance ; therefore, if we have not entirely forfeited your regard, we shall be glad to see you here as soon as you can make it convenient to yourself and friends. We do not approve of schools for young women of family, and as we are acquainted with a highly educated and most estimable—though plain-featured—young person, who is willing to reside with us and preside over your education, we have made arrangements to receive both on *trial*. You need not stop to consider your wardrobe, that shall be our care ; for of course you cannot procure anything decent in such an outlandish part of the world. If you can secure a respectable escort as far as Southampton, and will let us know the exact day and hour on which you will reach that town, our trusty servant Gregory shall meet you there and bring you on to us. Your affectionate aunts, according to your deserts, C. and S. VYVIANNE.

“N.B. Mind your pockets ; don't alight from the conveyance until you are sure of the steps ; and don't trust yourself with anyone unless he convinces you he is Gregory Webber, who squints with one eye, and whose nose is also oblique, but whose heart is in the right place. C. and S. V”

"Don't go," cried Nelly, laughing heartily. "You'll find yourself with a couple of lunatics, I'm convinced ;" but the perusal of another note which had evidently been enclosed at the last moment, the writing of which was faint and feeble, solved the enigma of the warlike missive and its peaceable follower. It began :—

"MY DEAR CHILD,

"I fear Sophia's first letter would pain you—she wrote it without consulting me ; but if her words were rough, I hope you will soon acknowledge her intentions are good. You must make allowances for elderly people ; I hope when we know each other we shall be good friends. Bygones shall be bygones, and I trust *we* shall feel, and *you* take pleasure in believing us to be,

"Your affectionate aunts,

"C. and S. VYVIANNE."

"Which is which, papa ? What does it all mean ?"

"Constance is Miss Vyvianne : but she allows Sophia to govern the house, and take the lead in almost all things : though, as I can see by this sly scrap of paper, she has asserted her authority on this occasion. Even to this she has been careful to sign her sister's name with her own. Dear me, Hannah ! is it not strange ? I never saw any letter on the most trivial subject, without the joint signature."

"It's an amiable weakness, my dear : they are joint heiresses, and I dare say they think it would amount to a deed of separation, were they to leave out either name. Miss Sophia is decidedly a rough diamond, but Miss Vyvianne is a thoroughly amiable, lovable woman."

So the child's fate was decided. To draw back now would be against her father's express commands, and

even Helen was convinced there must be no procrastination. Poor Constance's sorrowful, "I shall miss Bertie's wedding," met with no consolation, beyond a promise that all particulars thereof should be faithfully written to her.

On the last evening, she walked sadly down the familiar avenue, all her glowing dreams of the future quenched in the sadness of parting. Nelly in vain declared she was to be envied, and that she would gladly exchange places with her. The young girl's tears flowed fast when Bertha and Lord Charles came up for another farewell, and it seemed to her as if she were bidding adieu to all she loved on earth.

The last picture of these kind friends she carried away in her mind's eye remained on her memory for many long years. They were leaning over the avenue gate when she turned round for a last look ere she passed out of sight. The trees arched over them, and the leafy background threw their graceful figures into clear relief. Bertie's hands were clasped over her lover's arm, and her face wore the sweet happy expression that gratified affection had called forth; her blue eyes seemed flooded in serenity, and the flickering sunlight on her uncovered head invested it with a halo that imparted a saintly beauty. Lord Charles stood between the sisters; he, too, looked intensely happy, and as Constance at last turned away, it was with the belief that all the world could not produce three more prepossessing people.

The last morning came next, and already the little bed-room and the cosy kitchen looked strange in Constance's eyes. Her uncle fidgeted about, and her aunt busied herself in the larder in cutting more sandwiches than would be required in a journey across the Sahara, and in trying to dispel the uncomfortable feeling at her heart, by scolding the little servant.

When her voice sounded in safe distance, John pulled out of his pocket a handful of miscellaneous coins, from a fourpenny-piece to half-a-crown, with a sprinkling of copper, the value of the whole being about ten shillings.

"There, my darling," he said, pressing it upon his niece's acceptance, "be quick and put it away. *She*," with a jerk of his thumb in the direction of the scolding voice, "knows nothing about it, so if she offers you any more, you take it, my dear."

"No, uncle, dear, indeed I will not rob you."

"I've saved it on purpose: you will hurt me if you refuse: and, lovee, you won't forget your poor uncle when you're among the grand folks; none of 'em can love you so much."

His trembling voice and tearful eyes went to her inmost heart; nor did she feel inclined to smile at the handful of promiscuous money. All his simple and unvarying kindness, his soothing caresses on that cold dreary night of her arrival, his forbearance with her childish fits of anger, crowded to her memory, and as she threw her arms around his neck, she vowed never to forget his honest tenderness.

"Oh! uncle, dear," she sobbed, "you know I shall never love anyone as I love you: you believe that I never can forget you; tell me so, dear!"

"God bless you," he cried. "Ah, darling, you remind me of poor Louey—but she forgot me: she forgot us all."

"Am I like her in the face?"

"Only when you have that soft look; you're a deal grander-looking than her. God keep you from a like fate."

Once more he kissed her, and bade God bless her,

with all the earnest warmth of his pious nature ; but the moment his wife appeared, his conventional drawl returned, and he added as if he were in the pulpit,—

“The Lord of Hosts protect you, and keep you from falling into the bottomless receptacle on the *hedge* of which we are all prone to loiter !”

“There, there !” cried Hester Jane, “keep the rest for Sunday. Here are your sandwiches, Betsy Jane, and a box of my pills, in case you meet with a poor body in the ‘shaky rheumatiz :’ only mind you don’t tell they are made of candle-snuffs, for some folks’ stomachs is soon turned ; and they can’t guess, for I’ve flavoured ’em nicely with peppermint.”

“Oh, my dear !” John exclaimed, “folks in London ’ll be sure to know a better cure than that.”

“Not at all. Why, it was my grandmother’s receipt, and never printed : and she *was* a woman, I can tell you. As for them poor cockneys as don’t know the difference between a *v* and a *w* ! not they indeed ! but if they do, mind you let me know, Betsy Jane, for I should be glad to mend my opinion of the poor *denuded* things.”

“Ah !” interrupted John, “here’s the shay, my dear.”

“Ay !” said Mrs. Gittens ; “well, we must all go some day or other ; there, God bless you : that ’ll do, I can’t abide being kissed and mopped over. John never did such a thing, unless it was just after being shaved on a Saturday ; it’s all very well for babies and such like weak things, but one hardly ever hears of it nowadays.”

But, notwithstanding her hard words, she wiped her eyes as she returned into her quiet house, and prepared an unwonted treat for John’s dinner.

To Constance, this departure recalled that other departure, when she had stood on the deck of the homeward-bound vessel, clasping her ayah’s dusky hand, and

watching the embowered houses of Garden Reach fade in the distance. Five years had elapsed since then, and again she was entertaining bright hopes of the strange future. Would they prove as disappointing? One more look at the sea, one more glimpse of the gabled Manor House, and a new era in her life had commenced.





CHAPTER XIII.

KING'S REST.

KING'S REST stands in the aristocratic seclusion of Hampton Court Park ; it is carefully railed off from the royal pleasure, but the grand old trees of the park overhang its gardens, and shade its ancient rooms. The long avenues stretch in green beauty between the house and the palace, and nothing interrupts the view of the raised walks and carefully-kept parterres of the royal gardens. Formerly it stood unenclosed, but on ceasing to be royal property, the drive between it and the palace was turfed over, and only a right of footway and a private key was permitted to its untitled owners.

The picturesque gable ends and twisted chimneys of King's Rest, are said to have originated the architectural design of Cardinal Wolsey's costly country seat, and the Cardinal removed from his lodging at Esher, and took up his quarters at the Park Lodge—as King's Rest was then called—for the convenience of overlooking his rising palace,—a reminiscence that proves workmen to have been in those days just as dilatory and troublesome as they are now. It is very evident that that part of the palace (near the Vinery in particular) which escaped Dutch William's altering hand, is in precisely the same

style as the smaller dwelling in the park ; and whether the Cardinal ever sojourned at the latter place or not, it was certainly his property (and inherits his spiders!), and as such, passed with its stately neighbour into Henry's hands when that greedy monarch grasped the enforced gift. After that it became a banqueting house, and scandalous chroniclers of that day and succeeding reigns tell of uncourtly romps, and unkingly tricks, enacted in its quaint garden alleys, and dark, low rooms. It was just a pleasant stroll, in the shade of the trees, for the delicate court ladies, and their overdressed gallants from the palace ; its seclusion affording an agreeable change from the public staircases and corridors of the latter.

A frail favourite coaxed it as a gift from a frail sovereign and held mimic court therein ; until one fine day, the crown changed heads, and though Mistress ——'s claim was proved valid, she was not anxious to retain possession : finding in her adversity that the paths of vice were neither pleasant nor profitable, she parted with her ill-gotten gains as lightly as she had won them, and King's Rest became the property of the Vyvianne family.

Here the Misses Vyvianne drew their first breath, and here they hoped to part with their last. With them life had passed very peaceably ; spring, summer, autumn, and winter came and went, they hardly considered how rapidly. The servants, who had been young with them, remained with them in their age, and many of their early friends were now settled in the aristocratic shelter of the palatial asylum. Miss Sophia might sometimes wonder why the bright colours that had formerly suited her so well, now failed to draw out the brilliancy of her eyes and complexion, and Miss Constance would observe occasionally, that butcher's meat was no longer so well fed or so tender as in her young days ; but, as all in nature

around them remained unchanged by time, they could hardly realise how they were hurrying down Time's never-turning current.

For four years Constance lived in that old-world mansion, developing her faculties, storing her mind, and experiencing much care and love ; but although she appreciated the attention and kindness now heaped upon her, and which she had never known in her neglected childhood, her heart remained faithful to her homely uncle, and the far-off haunts at Spireton.

The old ladies soon learned to tolerate, and at length cordially to forgive, their favourite nephew's thoughtless marriage for the sake of his child ; but they would not recognise the humble connections. On Constance's first arrival she was informed that henceforth she must be a stranger to her mother's kinsfolk ; but she plainly protested against such a thing, and her determined spirit triumphed. She could give the Framptons up, but her Uncle John, never !

Miss Sophia recognised the brave firmness of her much-prized Roman ancestors, and forbore to press the point ; so every month a long affectionate letter gladdened John Gittens's loving heart with lively details of his darling's progress : and, of these letters, which were written without any attempt at disguise, Miss Sophia found it convenient to take no notice.

By-and-by, as Constance approached womanhood, she found the monotonous life wearisome, wondered at the unvaried manner which seemed to content her aunts, and with her young imagination all aglow, fretted against the dull uniformity. The leafy screens that shut them in on all sides were oppressive to the ardent gaze that would roam unfettered ; she would lean over the low wall overlooking the river, and envy the shining water that flowed

ever onward. No luxury could compensate for the attendant restrictions : she was expected to give an account of her every movement ; she was never allowed to go out of the garden unattended, and though she pleaded to be permitted to ramble in the park alone, her request was considered improper, and was denied. Miss Sophia admitted that one might walk the whole length and breadth of the Home Park without meeting anyone, but the palisading that divided it from the gardens was not impervious ; she wouldn't trust anyone, not even the palace people, who alone had the right of entrance. They might be respectable, of course they were respectable, but they frequently had relations with them whose lives were not spotless. A young lady should never be seen alone, &c. On which Constance thought of Helen's surreptitious rambles, and wondered how she would tolerate vigilant surveillance.

In the summer afternoons, when the regimental band played in the lime avenue of the palace gardens, the Misses Vyvianne, escorted in solemn state by Gregory, passed through the iron barrier of the park, and joined the gay throng of listeners. This was considered a great treat for their niece, but not *by* the niece ; for, as her Aunt Sophia kept a steady watch on every man that passed, she found, that unless her gaze was restricted to the gravel and turf, she was very likely to get a scolding for immodesty. It was Miss Sophia's opinion that all men were designing and abandoned ; perhaps she also believed in Pope's envenomed lash at her own sex, for she openly remarked that, for aught she knew, Constance might be as weak-minded as her poor foolish mother, but that it should not be her (Miss Sophia's) fault, if she followed that mother's example.

It was impossible to pass the trio, with their old-

fashioned serving man, without notice, and impossible to notice them without discerning the anxious watch kept on the young girl. The officers quartered at Hampton Court, and those who rode over from Hounslow, soon observed Miss Sophia's irritable vigilance, and delighted in exciting her suspicion by constantly passing and re-passing; though without any hope of receiving a glance from the downcast eyes of her niece. While the latter was too young to notice this, their importunity, though disagreeable, was bearable; but now when she was eighteen, and the conscious colour rose as the jingle of spurs and swords announced mischief was nigh, the old lady's wrath burst forth. Stronger measures than frowns and abrupt turning in their face must be resorted to, she felt; and one evening after visiting the gardens, she intimated, as they sat at tea, that henceforth they would keep in their own grounds on band days.

Miss Vyvianne hereupon put down the cup she was raising to her lips, and said, "Sophia," while Constance appeared gloomily engrossed with her bread-and-butter.

"Don't look cross, child!" exclaimed Miss Sophia, who had rather expected open war against her declaration. "I know better than to encourage those carpet soldiers dangling after you. I saw one of them follow us nearly home last Tuesday, and I am much inclined to go over to Hounslow and complain to the colonel."

"They only look at me to tease you, Aunt Sophia! Lady Grace told me her son heard them say so at mess the other night."

"Lady Grace always takes their part—a foolish old woman! Where were her ancestors five hundred years ago? Nowhere! A person who can reckon back no further than the Tudors is not capable of judging between right and wrong, so pray don't cite her as an authority.

And the very idea of those dressed-up liveryman daring to mention us at their ribald mess, indeed ! They may well call it a mess ! But what you tell me quite determines me to bear their impertinence no longer, and I shall drive over and speak to the colonel to-morrow."

And she arranged her cap and wig as if preparing for the interview.

"My dear Sophia, you'll not do any such thing. What can the colonel do ? He can only tell you there is no punishment in the army for nice young men who look at nice young women. Lady Grace says right ; no doubt they follow us from love of mischief."

"Miss Vyvianne, I lament over your degenerate spirit ; mine is very different, thank God ! I repeat, I shall go over to head-quarters to-morrow, and shall just inform the officers—if the colonel will not act like a man—that imperial natures cannot be insulted with impunity, and that in our veins runs the blood of one of Rome's greatest emperors."

"Then, Sophia, you will get laughed at ; pray do not entertain such a ridiculous idea. You say a young woman cannot be spoken of too little, but if you carry out this plan, the child will be the talk of every barrack and club in the kingdom, while you will be pronounced mad !"

Miss Sophia finished her tea in silence, and as she rose from the table exclaimed,—

"Very well ! once more I will let it pass ; but you will be grieved, I think, Miss Vyvianne, when you see the house surrounded by young men."

"Certainly, I shall, should such an unlikely circumstance ever occur ; but I must say that we must not deprive Constance of an innocent amusement, when she never behaves otherwise than modestly and properly."

"She is well enough at present, I admit; but misfortunes are better to be guarded against before they are likely. If she's fond of music, I will play the *Battle of Prague*, and what is finer melody than *The Harmonious Blacksmith*? she can sing pretty well also: surely, between us, we can make noise enough!"

"Ah!" she continued, confidentially, when she and her niece were left to themselves, "it's lamentable to see the plebeian stain in poor Miss Vyvianne. It is owing to a *mésalliance* made by an ancestor who lived in William Rufus's time (his court was none of the purest, my dear, for he was a poor wretched bachelor, you know), and though it is so many generations ago, the pure stream has not yet obliterated that one foul blot: I often detect it in my poor sister; she is so humble and weak-minded, so utterly wanting in self-respect. Now *I* am wholly Roman. Tell me, don't you perceive a great resemblance in my features to his Imperial Majesty's?"

And she exhibited a large coin attached to her watch-guard, bearing the head of one of the Cæsars. Constance examined it for the hundredth time, and professed to discover a likeness. But her uninterested manner did not pass unobserved.

"Ah, child!" said the old lady, pathetically, "it will take centuries to purify and wash away the taint caused by your thoughtless father's marriage. I can discern the plebeian mud in you; and yet if it was not for your unfortunate nose, you might pass muster."

And she took the coin from Constance, and looking from one to the other, tried in vain to trace a similarity in the battered, laurel-crowned head of the old heathen and the bright, sweet face of the young girl.

"Dear me!" she cried, with a sigh, "that nondescript nose spoils all: the long eyes, the full, arched lips, and

the oval chin are very good ; there is the broad, low forehead ; and the imperial shoulders are really like his ; but that brown hair and turned up nose ! ”

“ Turned-up nose, aunt ? A *nez retroussé*, if you please ! ”

“ I should be sorry to use such language ! ”

“ Don’t you like French, Aunt Sophia ? ”

“ Like it ? do you take me for a traitor ? No, indeed, I should be sorry to encourage such unprincipled reptile eaters by speaking their jargon. Latin I have no objection to : that I consider as our native language. ”

“ But Latin and French have many words in common,” said Constance, delighted at drawing her aunt out ; “ besides, you know, it was Imperial France until very lately ! ”

“ Never ! That Corsican adventurer was never Imperial ; it was a misnomer to call him an emperor—a living sarcasm. He was a mere adventurer ; a blot on the purple ; he had not one respectable ancestor. I doubt whether he even had a grandfather. Never let me hear such sentiments again, or I shall consider your degenerate nose to be the index of your mind. ”

As the old lady remained silent from indignation after this outbreak, Constance sought refuge in her elder aunt’s dressing room.

“ Dear aunt,” she said, “ I have had another chapter on our imperial ancestors. Did Aunt Sophia always make such a fuss about them ? ”

“ No, I fancy she has become more tiresome lately ; perhaps for your benefit ; for my part, I take no pride in such a descent. The best of our ancestors, in my opinion, was chamberlain to William Rufus and his Brother Henry : he married a virtuous woman, who converted him ; but because she was only the daughter of a

simple Norman squire, Sophia calls her a designing nobody."

"It will be very tiresome to hear the distant music, and not be able to enjoy it."

"Oh! I dare say she will change her mind, my dear; and if not, the self-denial will do us no harm. We shall always have something to bear, my dear; if this life were perfect, we should not care for another;" and she added, slyly, "there is no music at Spireton!"

"Ah! yes; the music of the waves!"

"Sentimental child! Well, when your father comes, I have no doubt he will take you there: this house and the Manor were his joint home in his youth, you know; then you will be free from your teasing old aunts!"

She spoke half merrily, half sadly; Constance guessed her feelings and was sorry.

"Dear aunt," she said, "I am very happy here with you; but you know how I love the sea, and the open country."

"Ah, yes, I know we none of us can appreciate the present: it is our nature to fancy the past was, and the future will be, brighter than the passing hour. No doubt this is because our spirits are restless in this mortal covering; for this is not our home. Hope gives place to regret, if it is earthly; but regret is unmixed with the hope that is heaven-born."

She said the last words as if to herself. Constance looked through the open window across the tranquil garden to the soft glades of the park, with the feeding deer lazily shaking their dappled ears; then her gaze returned to her aunt, sitting beside the little table with its burden of books and work, and she wondered whether regret for overthrown hopes had ever found a footing in such a secluded, uneventful life.

Miss Vyvianne understood the expression of her companion's thoughtful face.

"Seventy years," she said, "is a long life ; and yet in looking back they seem but as a dream ; not that I would live them over again. No, I would rather be sitting here as I am, waiting for death, than have my heart beating with youth and strength, and my imagination teeming with false hopes and vain expectations. My life has been a pleasant one, no doubt ; made happy by loving friends and pleasant companions ; but most of them have gone before, and I trust before long to meet them again, never to be parted more."

Constance said nothing, but her impatient spirit sickened at the idea of ever arriving at such a weary state of quiescent existence.

The old lady got up, and laughed merrily as she laid her hand on her niece's shoulder.

"I know what you think," she exclaimed. "*You* will never decline into a stupid inactive old woman ; you mean to judge for yourself of the wickedness and disappointments of the world. It is but natural for you to refuse to think hastily of what seems so fair and smooth. Well, well ; a few more months, and your father shall take you to judge for yourself."

Lady Charles Bolton was announced the next day, and Constance sprang joyously to meet her old friend Bertha.

"My dear Constance, how you are altered !"

"So are you. When did you return to England?"

"Only a few days ago. Can you believe we have been away three years ? But let me look at you before we begin to talk."

And the two young women held each other at

arms' length affectionately admiring each other's appearance. The sun of unclouded happiness had ripened Bertie into perfect loveliness. The calm intelligence of her sweet face was roused into vivacity, the overflowing of a joyous heart danced in her beaming eyes, the smoothness of her fair skin was untouched by sickness or care, and the dimples round her smiling lips, and the ripples of her bright hair, seemed to have caught the sunbeams and fixed them there. The brilliant dawn of her married life had called forth all the latent sweetness and *insouciance* of her disposition, and while Constance noticed the absence of all *hauteur* in her graceful movements, she gladly dispelled the last doubt that her aunt's words of the previous night had caused her to feel, as unnecessary and wrong ; for was not here a living illustration of perfect happiness, even in this world?

"Well, I cordially approve of you at last," cried Bertha. "Now sit down and tell me all the home news; for as we were not expected to arrive till next week, there are no letters awaiting me; and we have been tossing about the Mediterranean for the last fortnight, not daring to land for fear of cholera, and hardly daring to make way on account of privateers. Robinson Crusoe's adventures were nothing to ours. Now tell me, when did you hear last from Nelly? when does your father come, and is it true that Gabriel will accompany him?"

"Yes, they expect to be here in spring; won't it be lovely? and I heard from Nelly last week. Bertha, what made Nelly come and stay so long with you at Naples?"

"That is the very thing I was going to ask you. She was so wonderfully subdued, too, at first. I thought you knew everything. I fancied she had got into some

scrape down at home ; but that we should have heard from Mrs. Lance."

"Why didn't you ask her? *I* only saw her as she passed through London, and my aunts were with us, so we had no opportunity to have any private conversation."

"I fancy I got a little information by degrees ; but you know she is so fond of romancing, that what she says has to be cautiously dissected before believing it. She told me that your cousin was desperately in love with her, notwithstanding the decided coolness with which she treated him (*that* statement I decline to credit), and that he at last made her an offer, and was so determined to be heard, that to get rid of his importunity she determined to get out of his way. That is her version. Do you recollect the year after my marriage, papa had a long illness? Well ! of course Mrs. Lance scarcely ever left him ; visiting was out of the question, and Nelly was left pretty much to herself. Now my idea is, that for amusement she not only tolerated but encouraged Roger, until he showed himself so much in earnest, that she became frightened."

"But you know Roger also went abroad. Do you think he followed her?"

"I can't tell. I only know that when papa commented in one of his letters upon the folly of old Frampton spending his money on Roger's whims, she became desirous to return home again."

"Your idea is very likely ; but when I see Helen, I shall ask her straight out about Roger. But, Bertie, they say Gabriel is coming home on sick-leave. I hope it is nothing serious : you know, he has hardly been out eight years, and he went for ten."

"Oh ! I never expected he would stay so long as he

did, you little novice. Sick-leave is all nonsense ; an excuse to get home : you'll see when he arrives, he'll look quite a Hercules, and when we exclaim, he'll declare the sea voyage set him up again—that is what they all say."

This visit of Bertha's was a great enjoyment to Constance, and when her friend drove off, after making her promise to go next day and become acquainted with her children, the silent house and lonely park seemed to become more desolate.

At eighteen we look upon the world as ill used and maligned, not ill using, and in self-confident ignorance determine to avoid all its shoals and quicksands. For a little while we struggle out of the beaten track, buoyed up by the wings of hope ; for a little while our youth gilds the dross with pure gold, our lofty pedestal stands firm against a few disappointments and shocks to our vanity ; but gradually we begin to find the beaten road is our readiest way : we lower our grand schemes to the standard that is high enough for the majority, and learn to tolerate, if not to imitate, what we once derisively condemned.





CHAPTER XIV

HOME AT LAST.

66 **D**ON'T fill up your letters with accounts of Bertie's babies, my dear Con," wrote Helen about this time. "I am positively sick of the subject of Bertie: the newspapers eulogise her beauty and amiability, and the *Morning Post* gives a minute description of her dress at the last ball at Carlton House; even the *Gentleman's Magazine* has gone mad—not over her, but her husband, which is all the same—and actually gives his portrait (just as like him as the man in the moon), with a long account of his valour at Badajoz, his imprisonment afterwards, and his late valuable diplomatic services abroad; Lady Charles Bolton hangs in print in the bookseller's at Dorchester, and the Spiretons are full of her sayings and doings, as if she were a combination of Venus and Minerva. If she had married Johnny Craven these fine qualities and radiant charms would never have been discovered: not that I think she had such a chance, for I happen to know he never thought of her for a moment.

"Of course you know I like, admire, and esteem both Bertie and Charles beyond everything, though I think they are too demonstrative in their love; for really living in the same house with them as I did in Italy, one gets

too much of a good thing : and those children too—dear little things—are for ever in the room pawing one about. Well, I've said enough, but I can't help regretting to see such weakness in those I love so much.

“Of course you are aware, to change the subject, that poor *dear* Cousin Roger has returned from his *foreign tour*. What will the world come to? I fancy his French polish has brightened his wits, for he has not come in my way yet ; in fact I gave him such a snubbing at our last interview that I think he will not be eager to risk another ; but oh ! my dear, his looks are awful. I am quite looking forward to our migration for the winter, to get away from his silent anger.

“There is John Craven, too, *very* particular in his attentions ; but I have known him too many years to think of marrying him, so I have to be very cool to him also. I assure you it is no easy task to manage two ardent admirers at such close quarters. Roger has cut chapel, and favours our church ; so there is Johnny in the pulpit preaching down into our pew, and when I pretend to be fainting and loosing my bonnet-strings, and vigorously apply my smelling-salts to my nose, his anxiety overcomes his religion, and he becomes so nervous, that he loses his place, or turns over two pages at once, until becoming conscious that everyone is staring at him, he stops short, and coughs violently, and repeats ‘Therefore,’ or, ‘My dear brethren,’ until he finds the right sentence ; while Roger glares at us both, looking daggers at one, and thunderbolts at the other. I, as you know, am such a sweet innocent that I notice neither one nor the other, but having recovered, sit demurely regarding the bloated cherubs that decorate my respected grandfather's monument. Heigh-ho ! I am afraid church does not benefit us three *much*.”

Constance kept this characteristic epistle to herself; she could not bear to hear the Boltons disparaged even in jest, and it struck her that Miss Nelly's charity had not increased with her years.

Bertha's companionship made the winter pass delightfully; every year as the autumn changed to winter, it was the Misses Vyvianne's custom to leave King's Rest to be divested of its summer furniture, cleaned from top to bottom, and made comfortable for the cold season, while they spent the interim at Brighton. The Boltons were also there, staying by royal command close to the Pavilion; so the young people were constantly together, and Miss Sophia's eccentricities, which became daily more strongly developed, became more bearable, and only amusing with Lord Charles and Bertie to make Constance laugh at them.

When away from home, Miss Sophia delighted in being housekeeper, and provided such extraordinary meals, that Gregory and Reynolds did nothing but grumble and sigh for the comfortable repasts at King's Rest.

"Come, Constance," the old lady cried one morning, "Gregory has got the basket, I see; it is time we set off."

Constance, knowing what Gregory's basket portended, accompanied her aunt with "faltering steps and slow," not daring to refuse; but not at all liking to traverse the most frequented part of the town with Miss Sophia dressed in her oldest and shabbiest things, which were kept expressly for these occasions (as though she expected to come in contact with rotten eggs, or wet paint), and Gregory in gorgeous livery, with an enormous basket.

The appearance of Lord Charles coming towards them gave Constance's face a brighter expression.

"Where are you going, Miss Sophia?" he cried.

"To get the dinner. Come with me : you can take a lesson in the art of economical victualling."

"All right. I shall be delighted to profit by your experience," with a wink at Constance ; "but what is the basket for?"

"To carry our purchases, to be sure."

"But will not the tradespeople send what you want?"

"I dare say ; but I know better than to trust to them : they would substitute bad fish for the good one I bought, and swear it got bad in coming to me. There is something in the air of watering-places that breeds cheats ; but I'm up to them !"

On she marched, exulting in her sagacity, declaring openly everything to be very bad and very dear, poking her umbrella into fish, deliberately smelling the meat, and sternly asking the butcher to take his oath that the mutton had not been picked up dead out of a ditch.

"Now," she cried, triumphantly as they returned home, "I think I show them I know as much as they do ; and I have saved at least three shillings by going myself."

"Well, my dears !" cried Miss Vyvianne as they entered the drawing-room, "I hope you have got something nice for dinner to-day, for I'm not very well."

"I got what I could, not what I would," said her sister, throwing herself into an easy chair, and loosening her bonnet-strings, "and am quite fatigued with going from shop to shop to procure something you could fancy ; but really there was nothing to be had. Don't stand there in the open doorway, Gregory, making a draught all through the house ; take your basket and see everything weighed before you give it to cook."

With an immovable countenance, Gregory received her

orders, and obeyed by shutting the door and disappearing, while Miss Sophia continued,—

“There was actually nothing to be had but mutton-chops, Miss Vyvianne.”

“Nothing but mutton-chops, Sophia! bless me, what at three butchers’ shops!”

“Well, Miss Vyvianne, you know we can only conscientiously deal with one man, for of the others one is a Roman Catholic, the other a Radical: to be sure there was a bit of beef, but it was tough and stringy, and oh, so fat! As for the veal, I wouldn’t have touched it, it was so red and flabby. I think there were legs of mutton; but if so they were sure to be so muttoney that I determined to get chops.”

“Oh, dear! we have had them twice already this week: however, never mind! I dare say you got some nice fish to make up?”

“Fish! you never saw such a wretched set-out; and oh, so dear! shameful!”

“Dear!”

“Yes; but I did not ask the price of anything but soles; because I thought it all looked so nasty: did it not, Constance?”

Constance and Lord Charles, who had been trying to hide their amusement during this dialogue, had a distinct recollection of a well-filled slab of fine fresh fish, and hardly knew how to answer, as Miss Sophia had turned towards her niece and awaited her reply. Lord Charles walked off to the window with a murmured “Good gracious!” and Constance tried to keep straight by saying she had hardly observed. But this made matters worse instead of better.

“Hardly observed!” exclaimed her aunt; “then what is the use of my taking you to market and trying to in-

struct you, if you *will not* make use of your senses? Bless me, what would become of you if you were left to yourself? and you can't expect to have me always with you."

Constance earnestly trusted not, while Miss Vyvianne interposed with,—

"Well, well, Sophia! we can't expect to find old heads on young shoulders."

"I want to carry Constance away for the remainder of the day," said Lord Charles; "for we leave to-morrow for Yorkshire."

"Yorkshire! anywhere near Mr. Lance's property in that county?"

"No: my brother's place is in Wensley Dale; Mr. Lance's on the Moors, near Bolton. By-the-bye, their place is vacant: you know, when Master Hopeful entangled himself with the Jews, it was let; but now I find the tenant has notice to quit, and they mean to go there themselves when the young man returns from India: it is a very fine property."

"Ah!" said Miss Sophia, "such property as that ought never to have been imperilled: but Mr. Lance, though a kind, good creature, has no spirit; he's not fit to have any boys to manage. Young men nowadays want keeping *tight* under; they are not what they used to be."

"My dear Sophia, Mr. Lance is Lord Charles's father-in-law."

"Oh! well, so he is; but I'm sure I've said nothing against him. Mr. Lance *is* weak-minded, Constance; but, at the same time, I used to be very fond of him."

"You are quite right, Miss Sophia," Lord Charles said, laughingly; "he has none of your Roman firmness."

"That's just what he wants," exclaimed the old lady :
"did I ever show you this coin?"

And out came the old piece of money, which he gravely examined and admired, as if for the first time.

"I tell you what it is," he said, as he escorted Constance to his house ; "if that old lady has not a screw loose in her composition, my name is not Charles Bolton."

"Her memory fails her, and she is so afraid of owning it that she will say anything rather than confess she does not remember. Aunt Constance, too, will not believe there is anything wrong."

"Ah, that's very natural ; but it strikes me that there's another loss beside that of memory."

The winter passed rapidly in hopeful dreams of approaching freedom, and in the early spring Constance received the following letter from her father, now *Major* Vyvianne.

"Dover.

"MY DEAR CONSTANCE,

"Thinking you will be anxious, I just scribble a line to tell you of our safe arrival in England. All seems unchanged and homelike. Why upon earth did I remain in India so many years? The only drawback I have felt since I reached civilised quarters is that I cannot knock a white fellow down when he stupidly misunderstands one ; however, I dare say I shall get accustomed to *mild* treatment in time.

"Your old friend Gabriel Lance and his wife are with me, and as soon as the baggage is landed we shall all go on to London. Day after to-morrow you may safely count on seeing

"Your affectionate

"C. H. V"

Constance flew with this letter to her aunts. Their coolness rather damped her excitement.

"Gracious!" cried Miss Sophia, "do control yourself, child: have you not been expecting him every day for the last month?" While her sister, who generally entered into all the girl's hopes and fears, immediately left the room, under pretence of preparing suitable accommodation for the major.

"All a pretence to leave us," said Miss Sophia. "She thinks now you will really go away, and she's so weak-minded she can't bear the idea; but, as I said to her, 'Why, Miss Vyvianne, you will have *me*—what more can you require?' Luckily, I have the pure Roman fortitude, and could part with everyone without grieving."

Gabriel's *wife* was a mystery to Constance, until the following morning, when a letter from Nelly cleared it.

"Fancy Gay bringing home a wife," wrote that young lady. "No, I can't fancy it: the idea is too absurd. I'll never believe he could be in love with anyone but himself, or ever summon up sufficient courage to pop the question; though as she is a widow, no doubt she spared him that trouble by doing it for him. It seems he wrote from India to tell us he contemplated marriage, but we only received the letter a day before we heard of his arrival in England. I don't know whether *I'm* pleased or not: papa is pleased, because he thinks it will steady him. However, she may be an advantage to me, for I can get about with her; and Bertie is useless, you know: she's so wrapt up in that stupid nursery. Then, again, I'm half sorry, for when one's brothers marry, they don't care for their sisters.

"Gabriel says she is the widow of one of your father's brother officers, is *very* elegant and accomplished, but

has two children and not a half-penny! She is also of 'foreign extraction,' not *Asiatic*; and that sounds rather *adventuress-like*. I am afraid you won't find that word in Johnson! Only fancy Gabriel saddling himself with two children! But at present the children are with their paternal grandmother, who is a rich old lady in London, bless her! Papa is so delighted at the thought of having Gay at home again, that he will only see the bright side of the question; which is, that she is young, handsome, and clever, and her pedigree, both English and Spanish, would satisfy *even* your aunt: for the rest, *nous verrons*.

"Of course Gay will never go out again, for affairs are prospering. Higmoor (sweet name, is it not?) is not to be let again, but is to be newly furnished, and we are to go and see the old place once more; in fact, we are planning no end of extravagances. You are coming down here almost directly—a piece of unnecessary information, no doubt—for papa insists upon your father accompanying the *bride* and *bridegroom* as soon as possible. I am longing to see what Major Vyvianne is like.

"I must just add, that in speaking of you this morning, papa said, 'I shall be so glad to have the child at *home again*'—no slight compliment from him: I hope you will duly appreciate it. Hurrah! Adieu!"

But the major did not make his appearance "the day after to-morrow,"—only another letter from him, which ran thus,—

"I hope you will not be disappointed at the postponement of my arrival at King's Rest. I need not assure you that *I* am; but on reaching London, both Lance and myself found we were such antiques in the way of

dress, that we are positively compelled to shut ourselves up until the tailor can render us presentable. Day after to-morrow—*really* this time—I shall hope to see you. Manage to meet me *alone* at half-past two o'clock, near the fountain opposite the *Dutch* front of the palace, and we will walk through the park together; as I shall be glad to have a little private conversation with you before I meet the old ladies.

“Pray say all that is kind to them for me; but tell them I shall not be able to spend the night at King’s Rest, but must return to town, as I have much business on hand (did I tell you I am leaving the service?), and am the more hurried because I have promised Mr. Lance to accompany his son down to Spireton in a few days.

“Of course you will accompany me; but we can settle our plans when we meet. I had a good account of you yesterday from an old friend who saw you last autumn at Brighton.

“Yours affectionately,
“C. H. V.”

Constance only communicated the facts of this letter to her aunts. Miss Sophia’s comment upon his excuse was, “Ah! the old leaven: of course it is more necessary for him to look well in the eye of the world, than to see his only child. I should feel flattered to be second to a tailor! But oh! what a pretty dainty-looking boy he was, Miss Vyvianne! I wonder if he has any liver left?”

“Poor boy!” cried Miss Vyvianne, wiping her eyes. “What can we give him for dinner, Sophia? He was always fond of plum-pudding; we must have one to give him a treat, dear boy!”

And both the old ladies recalled anecdotes of his childhood, and, picturing him as a slim, apple-cheeked boy, shed happy tears at the thought of welcoming home the truant ; both willing to forget and forgive the selfish disregard he had shown for their disinterested and anxious affection.





CHAPTER XV

PARENTAL AFFECTION.

HALF-PAST two o'clock of the appointed day found Constance, discreetly attended by her aunt's maid, Reynolds, stationed, according to the major's desire, near the fountain which lies between the red façade of the palace and the straight piece of ornamental water in the home park. The day was lovely, bright, and spring-like, the garden parterres were gay with tulips, crocuses, and ipaticas, and the broad green walks looked, notwithstanding the shadowy yew-trees and the Dutch formality, exceedingly pleasant. But the eyes of Constance looked neither at the quaint perspective, the velvet-like turf, the raised avenues, nor the river rolling far away round the boundary wall ; they were fixed on the dark entrance before which the weary sentinel paced monotonously, and eagerly scanned each new comer as he emerged out from the shady cloister into the bright sunlight.

The day happened to be one of those holidays when Cockneys first break through the dull home routine of winter, and try to believe in the return of spring by clubbing together to enjoy a day's excursion in the country by means of one of those elastic vehicles popularly denominated "wans ;" therefore there were

many visitors to Hampton Court, and the patience of Constance was sorely taxed as each stranger appeared, without one seeming likely to be her father.

Some advanced with the indifferent saunter that denoted old acquaintance with the place ; others with wide-open eyes and half unclosed mouths, as if prepared for any amount of the marvellous : even observing the soldiers' movements with no small degree of interest. A few came with set countenances and composed steps, fearing to betray any vulgar curiosity and untravelled delight ; while many trooped wearily forward as though tired out with "doing" the state apartments.

Once a sallow-faced, middle-aged man, very much pinched in at the waist, came straight forward towards the fountain, and for a moment the sinking heart of Constance feared he would claim her as his daughter : all the Indian officers she had ever seen resembled this yellow-skinned prematurely-aged person ; his careful get-up too was characteristic. Yet her heart rejected him even while it doubted ; and she was greatly relieved when he turned away and greeted an elderly lady.

Before leaving home, Miss Sophia had insisted on her taking a careful survey of a full-length portrait of the major painted in the seventeenth year of his age, when he first entered the army. Miss Sophia allowed that, "to be sure he was no longer a bashful ensign in all the brilliant rawness of new regimentals, but the Roman nose couldn't be changed," and she didn't suppose the sun of India could extract the colour from his eyes ; therefore if Constance made allowances for an additional twenty-five years, it would be an infallible guide by which she must recognise him.

The painting represented a graceful, rosy-checked, dark-eyed youth, negligently leaning against a magnifi-

cently caparisoned war-horse. The latter might be deemed inconsistent, as the young soldier was in a line regiment ; but one of the royal dukes had just been represented in a similar position, and as the artist agreed to put the charger in for a small consideration, the Misses Vyvianne thought the anomaly of little importance, considering the additional glory : and the "sitter" was by no means averse, for, as he very ingenuously observed, he hoped to become a general in time, and then a horse would be a necessary appendage ; a mode of reasoning highly satisfactory and conclusive to all parties.

The time passed on, and at length three o'clock clanged through the palace courts ; still no father.

"He can't be coming," Constance exclaimed disconsolately, and unfilial ideas concerning faithless tailors and pleasure-loving fathers floated in her mind.

"Perhaps," said Reynolds, "he'll come the Tennis Court way, Miss. Shall we walk down towards that end?"

Constance held up her hand impressively, and seating herself on a bench behind a huge group of rhododendrons, she peered eagerly through the branches of a spreading yew at some strangers who had entered by the way the maid had suggested. The tree screened their seat at one side, as the rhododendrons did on the other, and the newcomers' voices came distinctly to her ears : though she could scarcely see their forms as they walked close by.

A woman was speaking, and the clear tones, with a peculiar foreign accent, had arrested Constance's attention : she was saying,—

"This is not at all a bad sort of asylum ; when I am again a widow I will petition for apartments."

A light laugh accompanied her speech, which was answered by a gentleman's drawing,—

"Wait a little, old lady, you may make acquaintance with the daisy-roots sooner than I: besides, *my* wife will not have to accept charity."

Again the feminine voice was heard as if addressing another companion—

"And you, *mon ami*, you admire it—you have seen it before! What makes you so solemn? Ah! I forget, you have a daughter on your mind. Ah! how silly to think of you with a daughter!"

There was neither fatigue nor melancholy in the clear ringing tones that replied—

"To tell you the truth," said he, "I am getting nervous: suppose the old ladies are there, drawn up in battle-array?"

"Or suppose she is an overgrown rustic?" cried the lady. "I know you are more afraid lest she is not presentable. Confess now, you wish us back at Calcutta! But we will leave you directly we see you in safe hands."

As she spoke, they came round the screening yew-tree, and while their eyes went everywhere but in the right direction in search of Constance, the latter had time to take a momentary survey of those whom she now knew to be the expected ones.

Gabriel Lance was easily recognised: his skin had lost its youthful freshness, his figure was fuller and more manly, and his manner was very languid; but in the expressionless light blue eyes, the nerveless movements, and even in the backward set of the hat off the high narrow brow, there was sufficient to prove his identity. On his arm hung a very dashing looking lady, with bright black eyes, and a handsome restless face; she of course was the fascinating *ci-devant* widow.

From the young couple the eyes of Constance flew

swiftly to the figure at their side—a tall, erect, well-dressed figure, with a clear-cut noble face, standing with haughty self-possession, and examining with keen, hawk-like gaze the loiterers round the fountain. Something familiar in the proud dark eyes recalled the fading remembrance of the far-off childhood and the “pretty papa;” and yet the fair-complexioned ensign of her aunt’s drawing-room was not more totally dissimilar to the man now standing before her than was the pretty papa of her babyhood. All three phases seemed to belong to three separate people; and while her heart yearned to pronounce the name of father, it trembled before the strangely altered countenance.

Yet when his eyes at last fell on her, and softened from doubtful indecision into admiring certainty, her doubts became absorbed in love and tenderness: she rose hastily, crossed the gravel to where he stood eagerly watching her approach, but, her strength failing her as she reached his side, she could only put her hands round his arm for support, and exclaimed, breathlessly,—

“Dear papa, is it indeed you?”

The simple words, the tearful eyes, and the eloquence of her clinging grasp, said more than the most elaborate speech; even Mrs. Gabriel’s bright eyes softened, and she drew her husband silently away. While the major’s heart, acknowledging for once the voice of nature, opened to the simple appeal; and as his child wept out her happiness in his arms, he thought not of the lookers-on: thought only of soothing her with tender words and caresses.

But his emotion was of short duration, and he had a horror of female sensibility.

“Come, my darling,” he said at last, “I will have no more tears; we must think of our friends here,” and

putting her arm in his, he drew her towards Gabriel and his wife.

An idea of her father's fastidious taste in dress had made Constance put on her most becoming clothes for this occasion, and though her appearance now would most likely excite general amusement and ridicule, it was at that period considered superlatively elegant and *recherché*.

A pelisse of apple green silk, fitting tight to the figure, fell from under a small cape or large collar of the same material, to within a quarter of a yard of the bottom of her gown ; which was of finely worked white muslin, worn short enough to display the slender feet and ankles, encased in sandalled morocco shoes and open-work stockings. The head-gear was the celebrated Oldenbourg bonnet, which the sprightly sister of the Russian Emperor had made so fashionable ; it was adorned with a single bunch of what the *Court Circular* of the day described as the "*laylock* flower," and measured from the crown to the edge exactly half a yard and six inches. But monstrous as was its size, it afforded no unbecoming frame to a blooming face ; that is, if a passer-by was fortunate enough to get a glimpse of a countenance thus protected.

As the major presented Constance, all trace of anxiety had disappeared from his face ; he was perfectly satisfied that nothing in his daughter's appearance could raise Mrs. Gabriel's contempt : on the contrary, the latter showed by her cordial manner that she was pleased with the young lady, while Gabriel openly expressed his approval with the freedom of a brother. Then the major promised to return to them in time to reach town before midnight, there was an interchange of hopes between the ladies that they would soon become better acquainted, and the father

and daughter took the pathway through the Home Park to King's Rest.

The major was pleased with his pretty, lady-like child ; pleased at revisiting the scenes of his youth, and, above all, pleased with the style of his new clothes ; so he was altogether amiably inclined. And as his companion smilingly addressed him as "Dear papa," and unconsciously gave him all the insight he wished into her aunts' and Mr. Lance's family, he felt quite a virtuous family man, and only regretted his old Indian cronies could not witness how gracefully and loving he and his grown-up daughter assimilated.

As the ivy-covered casements and gnarled chimneys of King's Rest peered through the trees, he began to lose a little of his complacency ; remembering how he had last been forbidden to enter its doors, and how he had stood—a crest-fallen bridegroom—on the lawn, after announcing his hasty marriage, while the one aunt vented her haughty displeasure in pitiless words, and the other tearfully agreed with the verdict by her silence. He thought of all this and more : of his leaving them with a defiant smile, making no effort to smooth away their wrath, believing himself, in his youth and health, independent of them and all the world. He thought of all this ; but regretted it only because he had lived to consider his marriage a foolish one, and because he had been compelled to humble himself when he asked them to acknowledge his child.

He soon recovered, however, when he recognised Gregory at the door.

"Ah, Gregory !" he cried, "you not dead yet !" and so passed into the familiar drawing-room, with a smile.

Whatever displeasure towards him might have lurked in the recesses of their hearts, none was apparent as the

old ladies greeted their favourite brother's orphan, and heard the voice once more that had gladdened their ears with its childish merriment long years ago. He was so handsome, so polished, so affectionate, and such a flattering shade of deference to theirs mingled with his opinions, that even Miss Sophia expressed her admiration of him.

"He is a true Vyvianne," she said, "nose and all. Ah! there is nothing like the true Roman for wear! Yours is exactly like your imperial ancestors', my dear," and then she produced the celebrated coin to compare with it.

While Constance was taking off her bonnet, he alluded to her with a becoming sigh, as "so very superior to what he had any right to expect, considering——" the hiatus was very effective, and Miss Vyvianne hemmed in a considerate manner, to reassure him; then he flatteringly thanked them for their kindness to the "poor girl," and having gradually fallen into easy chat, he asked their advice as to his future life. His aunts' opinion was that he had better not form any establishment at present: it would do Constance good to move about a little. The major's opinion happened to be exactly the same, but he was naturally solicitous to have the benefit of their experience. Altogether, his visit was a triumph. He pronounced the pudding perfection, admired the old ladies' caps, professed to take their wigs for their own hair, and shook hands with his old friend Reynolds.

"The poor young man seemed so pleased with everything," said Miss Vyvianne, as she wiped her eyes after his departure. While the "poor young man," driving back to town as fast as four horses could take him, amused his companions with exaggerated accounts of the old ladies' eccentricities, the sombre grandeur of the

dinner, the wearisome etiquette, and the indigestible pudding.

"How the deuce that girl is so bright and lively astonishes me!" he said. "She's not bad-looking, is she?"

"No fishing for compliments," cried Gabriel; "don't gratify him, Annie; he wants us to say yes, because she's so like him. By George! how she astonished us with her sharpness at the Manor!"

The major gave utterance to a low laugh of perfect satisfaction: he was proud of his daughter; but his content was unmingled with paternal fondness.

The low, panelled dining-room at King's Rest was bright with the morning sun as the household assembled in it for prayers, and Constance knelt in her accustomed place for the last time, before entering into that world in whose joys and sorrows she was so eager to participate: for the last time she peeped through her parted fingers at the row of sober, middle-aged servants before their bench at the farther end of the room; at the erect form of Miss Sophia, who, with eyes wrinkled up, and hands firmly clasped, went through her devotions as if they were a matter of painful duty; at Miss Vyvianne's thin, quaint figure kneeling before a tall, carved reading-desk, and thence at the collection of dark-framed ancestors hanging round the apartment, all displaying, in bold relief, the distinguishing Roman nose.

Many a morning had Constance knelt under their painted gaze, and wondered whether they, with their keen dark eyes and supercilious mouths, had joyed and sorrowed like the rest of mankind; or whether, like Miss Sophia, they had lived to themselves, on the shadowy and legendary remembrance of departed grandeur. On this morning, however, her imagination had no space for

them; her eyes quickly went back to her elder aunt, whose tearful eyes and trembling voice, as she prayed for travellers by land and water, smote to her heart, and made her regret the selfish joy with which she was contemplating her removal from the roof that had so long and so hospitably sheltered her. She looked on the sunny, circumscribed garden, and again her heart bounded as she thought of the boundless sea and the limitless heath she would so soon behold again; but, spite of all this, the faltering tones, and the slight, drooping form before her, checked her happiness and chilled her overflowing delight.

"My dear," said the old lady as they sat at breakfast, "as far as we can tell, your home for the future will be with your father, until you exchange his protection for a still dearer one."

"Hush! hush!" interrupted her sister, "pray don't put such nonsense into her head! Look at us, my dear! you can't do better than follow our example."

"Ah! well! but such things do happen, Sophia; and the child may think differently to us: however, as I was saying, Constance, although at present you are fairly provided for, yet circumstances might arise to overthrow present arrangements, and——"

"Why don't you speak out, Miss Vyvianne? This is it, child: your father is young enough to marry again, and grown up step-daughters are not desirable, so, if he does you can come back to us, and we shall be glad to see you; that's all."

"Dear aunts, you are very, very good."

"But there is another thing," continued Miss Vyvianne, who by no means resented her sister's interference. "We have always taken your father's allowance for your education, because we thought it best to let him feel that

he must provide for you ; but we have not spent a penny of it ; Sophia and I have made it a thousand pounds, and have entered that amount in your name at our bank. You see, we think it will be pleasanter for you to be a little independent of him, while he is almost a stranger to you ; but we particularly request you not to mention this, for although we have the highest opinion of him——”

“Well, at present, he’s very amiable and good-looking,” put in Miss Sophia.

“——the highest opinion of his good principles,” repeated her sister emphatically, “yet he is but a young man, unaccustomed to female wants, and he may sometimes be irregular in giving you the allowance, which he named to us, and which we think is very handsome. Besides, we wish you not to feel limited, especially in your charity ; therefore, we now give you a little present to keep in your purse, and whenever you want anything, and do not like to ask your father, you can just send to us, and we’ll ask no questions. Not a word, my dear child ; not a word : we only wish you to feel that you can apply to us in any strait, and at any time. God bless you !”

The streaming eyes of Constance, as she drove off in the old coach and four, with Gregory and Reynolds, to deliver her with all decorum and state into her father’s care at Kingston, quite comforted poor Miss Vyvianne ; while Miss Sophia exclaimed, as the girl’s last wave of her hand in mute farewell was lost in distance——

“Ah ! she’s a nice creature ; if she had but a Christian-like nose, she’d be a true Vyvianne : she must be very careful to choose a husband with a pure aquiline, or the next generation will be downright snubs.”

The tears of Constance ceased in due time, and her face was radiant with hopeful smiles when they reached

Kingston ; however, even that very day she learned that unalloyed happiness could not be on earth ; for when the gentlemen were riding outside the chaise, and Mrs. Gabriel, after the first excitement of welcoming her travelling companion, had placed her feet on the opposite seat, and announcing her intention of trying to get a little sleep, had relapsed into perfect silence, she was obliged to confess that the selfishness of the young is less bearable than the calm inaction of the aged.

Mrs. Gabriel looked very pretty too, as she reclined in a corner with closed eyes ; only rousing herself to grumble at the heat or the dust, or the fatigue of sitting still, or the monotonous rumble of the wheels, and the selfishness of "those men with their cigars, enjoying the fresh air, and the lovely view." However, towards evening, and when they neared their resting-place for the night, she roused herself completely, tried to make herself more agreeable, and asked many questions about her husband's family, especially about her sisters-in-law : the latter seemed to be considered rather as bugbears.

"That was the best of dear Arthur," she said, alluding to her first husband ; "he had no sisters to be fussy over us, and he never required me to stay with his mother *en famille*. His mother is a dear old soul, so considerate ; for she is aware of my delicate constitution, and when she heard of my poor pet's death, she insisted on my sending the children to her at once, rightly guessing that I should be much too overpowered with grief to attend to them just then."

"Why did not you accompany them to England ? it would be so hard to part with them," Constance innocently observed.

"Very hard ! it almost broke the little heart I had left," she said, wiping her dry eyes. "I could not go with

them ; there were so many things to settle : besides, I had a sister at Calcutta who could not bear me out of her sight, and I could not keep my treasures till I had arranged my affairs, on account of their health."

"Poor little things ! I suppose some one you knew took charge of them on the voyage."

"Oh, yes, I sent my own maid ; for I would gladly deprive myself of every comfort for their sake : and oh ! she was such a treasure ! When my own darling Arthur used to come home from mess a little excited, that good creature would get him quietly off to his room, and I never knew anything till I had slept off the fatigue of my party ; she so well understood the extreme delicacy of my constitution. I wished her to accompany my chicks also, because I can depend upon her telling me how things go on in the old lady's ménage."

A look rather more knowing than tender passed over her languid countenance as she spoke. Mrs. Gabriel was evidently not too fine a lady to have an eye to the main chance.

"You have known papa a long time ?" Constance asked, delighted to find her in a talkative mood at last.

"Yes, he was my first partner at my first Indian ball ; he introduced Gabriel to me."

"Then you knew Gabriel before you were a widow ?"

"Yes, and I knew he admired me in my dead darling's lifetime ; but my sainted mother always said, 'Be virtuous, my Annie,' and I really think I carry virtue almost too far : prudery is my weakness. You don't understand Indian society, *ma chère*, or you would appreciate the difficulty of my position : all the men were dying for me at once. But once and again I said to myself, 'Be virtuous, my Annie,' and I assure you I never even so much as returned the pressure of Gabriel's hand till I had been

a widow for three months ! But I would rather be a prude than an unfeeling flirt !”

With a complacent smile of self-approval, Mrs. Gabriel settled herself more comfortably among the cushions, and continued to recount further proofs of her high principled conduct, in the midst of so much temptation. Constance, bewildered at this novel illustration of virtue, felt like one who, reading a French novel for the first time, finds all her preconceived notions of honour and decorum exchanged for mawkish sentimentality, and very questionable morality ; but so speciously argued, and so exquisitely served up in flowery periods and the purest idiom, that she stops in amaze, unable to discern where wrong ends and right begins, so subtle is the line between them, and so dexterously are vice and virtue blended.

“ I remember so well,” continued Mrs. Gabriel, flattering herself that she was inculcating a fine moral lesson on Constance, “ Gabriel came to call, just as I had parted with my fatherless treasures. He saw my uncontrollable grief, and expressed so much sympathy that I could not help showing him my appreciation of his kindness. After that he came daily, and when I told him I had made up my mind to return to England, as I could not exist without my Arthur’s cherubs, he said I had better go with him, as he had determined to accompany your father : and in fact, *m’amie*, proposed ! I said, No. I am so sensitive. Was six months a sufficient time to devote to the memory of my lost one ? I felt it was not. Besides, what would his mother say ? I could not offend her ; she is so rich, and has all at her own disposal.

“ Then, again, I could not bear to wound Gabriel’s feelings, and if I refused him I should have to wait for another convoy ; for of course, with my sensitive mind, I could not travel in the same ship with him, excepting as

his wife. Was ever woman placed in such embarrassed circumstances? Poor dear fellow, when he heard my scruples he was heartbroken; so I sent for your father, who has always been a kind friend to me, and I begged him to tell me if Captain Lance was worthy to fill my poor Arthur's place. He told me of his good family and prospects, and reminded me that I ought to think of myself, and not to throw away happiness for the sake of Mrs. Grundy; so I choked back my tears over the grave of my dead pet, and consented to make Gabriel happy: and I know if my angel witnessed my conduct, he would approve of my unselfish abandonment of outward grief."

"I suppose you saw the children while you were in London?" said Constance, as her companion stopped to take breath.

"Oh, yes! I had them to spend a day with me; but my nerves are so shattered, their dear little voices quite upset me—reminded me of the past, you know. Dear Gabriel is so thoughtful, so kind; he wanted to have them to live with us, for he sees how I dote on them; but I would not be selfish: he is not accustomed to children, and I feel sure, if they were in the same house with me, I should never be happy without them; and I promised grandmamma, who is rather deaf and not at all disturbed by their noise, that I will not interfere with them—at present, at all events."

Constance, who was rather embarrassed by this unsought confidence, felt relieved when they reached the end of the first day's journey.

In the evening the major asked his daughter to take a stroll with him, and as they sauntered together in the twilight, he led the conversation to the inmates of the Manor. From them it was easy for Constance to mention the Gittenses; but he avoided that subject care-

fully, and without asking any leading question, contrived to learn all about Nelly's beauty, Bertie's married life, Mr. Lance's peculiarities, and the particulars of their doings since Constance had known them. No other subject seemed to interest him; even when she turned the conversation to India, and reminded him of bygone days, asking after native servants, and mentioning allusions he had made in his letters concerning old friends.

"I forget those antediluvian days," he said at last, as she persevered in her reminiscences. "You and I can find pleasanter topics, I think. How do you like Annie Lance?"

"Mrs. Gabriel! Oh—she is very pretty."

"Hem!" he exclaimed; "prudence is one of your virtues, I see: but I wish you to cultivate her acquaintance; she can be a very useful acquaintance to you."

"Yes, papa."

"I hope," he added, stopping short and speaking half nervously, "I hope you have no Methodistical notions."

"I used to go to chapel with Uncle John, but I never liked it. Of course I have never been since."

"I hardly mean that," he answered, as if perplexed how to express himself; "I mean, I hope you have no overstrained notions. You must take the world as you find it, and you cannot afford to set up yourself as a standard of moral excellence; you must leave that to unalloyed rank and position: so far as my family is concerned, of course you are unquestionably equal, if not superior, to any of our nobility; but—you see—in fact, your best plan is not to court reflection on your own pedigree, by reflecting on others——"

"I know what you mean," she interrupted, with her old impetuosity; "you mean if I put myself forward as a judge of propriety, people will say, 'Who is *she*?' but I

am quite aware of my own deficiencies of character, and as to mamma and her family, no one can say a word against them ; they——”

The major made an impatient gesture.

“I should have thought your aunts would have taught you the value of birth,” he exclaimed : “if they have not, you will soon learn it by experience. Pray don’t talk in that high-flown strain, Constance. No doubt the Gittenses are highly virtuous people ; but who considers virtue without station ? My dear child, the idea is superlatively absurd !”

There was a disappointed feeling, a sinking at her heart, as her father spoke, and a conviction that between their ideas was a vast difference. He perhaps heard a little sigh, and thought that he had better not alienate her confidence by assuming the stern parent quite so soon ; for he added merrily,—

“But you are quite right, my darling ; virtue ought to be our first consideration, and your warmth raises my admiration. One thing is very certain, you have the Vyvianes’ temper, easily roused, easily quelled.” And as they entered the hotel and returned to the Lances, he gallantly sang in a low tone,—

She’s all my fancy painted her, she’s lovely, she’s divine !

It was late in the evening of the following day when the travellers reached Dulton, where they exchanged the postchaise for the Manor carriage, which was awaiting them. As usual, the Dultonites were eager to make the most of any excitement, and crowded round the “Bear,” while they made their exit. The bells rang a noisy welcome to the returned heir and his bride.

“Oh, Lord !” cried Gabriel, in dismay at the crowd.

"I hope they won't want any speechifying, Hallo, John, how are you?"

"All right now you're back again, Master Gay—I beg pardon, captain. Lor' bless you! they don't want nothen of preachifying. Master Bolton, he be the chap for that game—he *do* spin a yarn, as he do call it. Maybe, you fell in with him crossing the seas, Sir? He be cruising about and getting on, I hear. Ah! he'll be a hadmiral, I say! he be so uncommon sharp."

So they drove on out of the town, over the bridge, and over the heath, till the sound of the bells was left behind; on through the shadowy winding lanes; on towards that familiar range of hills over which a long glowing line of sky, deepening from pink to tawny red, reflected its varying beauty in the sea beneath; on against the breeze that freshened as they advanced; on over that same road, and against that same breeze that had seemed so dreary and bleak when Constance had first travelled that way: but now all was changed to her, and as she recognised each barren height, each spectral clump of pines, her heart exulted in the thought of nearing home! Again, as in that weary journey of long ago, the horses stopped on the brow of the hill to recover breath, and again she looked down into the twilight valley with its twinkling lights; now appearing as so many friendly eyes beaming with affection.

In the silence of the momentary stoppage, the sound of the village chimes came upwards.

Gabriel leaned out of the window, and became quite excited.

"By George!" he cried, "they're killing the fatted calf, and all that sort of thing, as Shakspeare says. Eh, Annie! 'pon my soul it's very good of them: and don't the air smell sweet? Ah! this is what I used to long

for when we were broiling under that horrid punkah. Ugh ! I hear it squeak now. Are you asleep, Vyvianne?"

The major made no reply. He had been very silent ever since they left Dulton : perhaps the sweet music of those bells spoke to his jaded heart of other days, and innocent pleasures long since buried under worldly schemes and vanities ; perhaps other tones mingled with the chimes—tones that had sounded in his ears when last he travelled this road ; perhaps he was regretting their silence now ; perhaps regretting the absences of the lowly flower that had then nestled beside him ; perhaps regretting that he had transplanted that delicate flower to wither and die in a foreign soil. All alone she now lay deserted in her lonely grave ; and he !——

If such were his thoughts, he hid them down in the recesses of his heart, and bestirred himself to sympathise with Mrs. Gabriel ; who, having no reminiscences, pleasing or otherwise, connected with Spireton, was shrugging her shoulders at her husband's rapturous exclamations, and shiveringly begging him to draw up the glasses and keep out that "awfully boisterous wind."

If Constance believed she would be able to have a good night's rest after her fatigue, she was very much mistaken, for Nelly accompanied her to her room, and announced her intention to sit down and have a good talk.

"I've hardly caught sight of you yet," she said, and to-morrow there will be just as much scrimmage, so I must come now and hear all the news. But first I cannot help saying how handsome your papa is ; he is positively perfection : he is quite like your brother ; how young he looks ! Do tell me, has he said anything about me ? I am afraid he will be disappointed. Do I look very aged ?"

"Oh, Nelly ! how exactly you remain the same. I

remember you used to ask me what Lord Charles said of you before we knew he liked Bertie ; don't you——”

“Oh, good gracious ! you horrid child, don't dive into those musty chronicles ; but——”

“Well, seriously, then, considering it was nine o'clock when we arrived here, and I have not spoken to him, or had a word from him excepting ‘good-night’ since, how was he to inform me what he thinks of you ?”

“All right, child ! but you will tell me when he does, won't you ? word for word, remember—for, of course, I like to hear whether people are pleased or not. Well, what do you think of Annie ? doesn't her dress fit beautifully ? I am afraid Gay is rather *soft* about her : I wonder he liked a widow. I can't say I should like second-hand love myself. But she seems to take Gay's attentions very quietly ; of course she's gone through it all before. Isn't it provoking of Bertie, having a baby just when she knew we wanted her here ? However, I dare say, one loving couple will be as much as we can stand. But now, dear, tell me honestly, how do you think I am wearing ?”

Constance's old ideas of her friend's unqualified perfections had suffered some diminution, and she now regarded her, preparatory to answering her question, with the eyes of experience, only slightly veiled by partiality. To say the truth, Miss Lance had not suffered materially from the ravages of time ; fresh air, early hours, and a quiet life, had kept the spoiler at bay ; her hair was as abundantly glossy, her complexion as bright and smooth as ever, and even the acquired plumpness of her figure added to, instead of detracting from, its grace. If the freshness of early youth had disappeared, maturity had brought other charms : had made perfect the bewildering arts of her brilliant eyes, had taught the blue-veined

lids a more dangerous droop, and the long lashes a more fatal sweep, as they raised their silken fringe to loosen the bolt from the soft depth beneath; and many a younger and fairer archer would fail, with all her youth and beauty, where Nelly's experienced skill won a complete victory. It was the triumph of art over nature.

Constance could, therefore, conscientiously affirm that Nelly looked as pretty as ever; and the latter's vanity being thoroughly appeased, she allowed her companion to choose the next subject, which was concerning Roger Frampton.

"I wonder if papa will notice him," she said; "is he at home now? I have not mentioned the Framptons to him yet."

"From the little I know of your father," said Nelly, "I fancy he has a will of his own, and I should not think he and the Gittenses or any of that set will amalgamate. But I *should* like to see him first meet Roger: the latter is idling about again. Fancy him calling Major Vyvianne 'uncle!' Oh! I would give anything to see your father's face!"

"I am not comfortable about it, Nelly. I would give up the Framptons if he wishes, but I cannot slight the Gittenses, even for him!"

"Oh, it will be all right. I'm so glad you have all come, for I don't like going about alone; Roger is so impertinent."

"In following you, I suppose?"

"Worse than that; he has the folly to imagine that I once liked him. You remember I paid him a little civility at the election for his vote, and afterwards I did not like to drop him all at once, it seemed so rude; so when I met him once or twice on the cliffs, and he joined me, I behaved to him as I should to an equal. I think

we met in that way two or three times—I'm sure I forget how often—but to my intense amazement, one day he actually made me an offer! Well, I confess I was so taken aback that I laughed at his presumption; and then he stormed out. Oh! Constance, I never saw such passion in all my life before! He frightened me completely; and to calm him down I did a very foolish thing—of course, he ought to have seen I only said it to get rid of him—I told him I did not dislike him for himself, only ——”

“Oh, Nelly! surely you were not so cruel, so treacherous?”

Helen's face flushed.

“What could I do?” she said, “he really was so furious; I would have said or done anything to appease him: in fact what I *did* say I don't recollect, I was really so alarmed. However, perhaps I *was* wrong; but a *gentleman* would have made allowances, instead of taking advantage as Roger did, and pestering me for ever.”

“And was that why you went abroad?”

“If I say yes, you will never betray my confidence, I know? Yes, I went abroad to get away from him, and I succeeded. When he took it into his head to travel, I thought I might return in safety; so I did.”

“Well, and this last winter, how have you managed?”

“He began the old game of tracking my footsteps till he obliged me to give him a hearing; he professing to believe I really wanted an excuse to see him, until he drove me to declare he was a fool. He stormed worse than before at that—as you may imagine—and just as I was at my wit's-end to know how to make my escape, up came Johnny Craven: in fact, I had set out for the express purpose of meeting him riding home from Dulton. At his appearance, Roger vanished, and I once more

came off without serious injury. I believe he would have enjoyed hurling me over the cliffs in his rage: I was seriously sorry for him, too."

"But you would not marry such a creature, even supposing he was in your own rank of life and enormously rich?"

"Really, I can't say: enormous wealth would make all the difference in the world, my dear; but I don't mind confessing to you that I never regretted my love of flirting so much before."

"I thought you only treated him civilly—at least so you said!"

She laughed as she replied,—

"Did I say so? Well, however, there is Roger breathing vows and threatenings still. I shall never feel safe while he is in the neighbourhood. How different to John Craven! I might treat *him* like a dog, and he would not be angry, only grieved. Poor Johnny!"

She sighed, and Constance remarked,—

"Pity is akin to love; I should not be surprised to see you become Mrs. Johnny, after all."

"No, thank you; but while I am confessing my sins, I may as well make a clean breast; that is, if you are not tired?"

Constance repressed a yawn, as she knotted her hair up for the night.

"Oh, no," she answered; "go on."

"You know," said Nelly, "as well as I do, that it is my fault there is no Mrs. John Craven; for years I have had to exercise all my ingenuity to prevent his making the final plunge, and obliging me to tell him 'I couldn't give my 'and where my 'eart cannot be,' as the song says; though he, as you are aware, was prepared to do so on the shortest possible notice. Oh! the ingenious

devices and stratagems to which I have had recourse to keep him just on the brink ; and what fun I have had, drawing him on to the extreme verge, and then shutting him up like a convolvulus on a cloudy day, by withdrawing the sunshine of my countenance. But that very afternoon on which he interrupted Roger and me so opportunely, I suppose I showed my delight at his arrival too unguardedly, for out he spoke, my dear. If you had but seen the colour in his face ! I really was afraid he was going to have a fit ; however, when he was fairly started, he became absolutely eloquent, and spoke so nicely, and gave unworthy me credit for so many virtues, that actually I had no excuse to offer. I am always so wanting in presence of mind at the right moment, and I found him in fits of delight the next moment, rejoicing in the belief that I meant to become a model parson's wife ! Luckily, papa was in Yorkshire, therefore we could not settle things just yet ; but I left him firmly persuaded that everything would be smooth ; and, really, my own heart was quite softened as I thought it over, for he had been so good in the autumn, when the fever was in the parish, going from one sick bed to another, day and night ; and you know Lucy died about that time ; altogether, I could not find it in my heart to be unkind to him."

"So you are engaged?"

"Don't jump to conclusions. I tell you I felt so good *at the time* that I began to be of his opinion, and to fancy all my good qualities had been lying dormant, and were now coming out strong ! I went home leaving him in ecstasies, routed out some old flannel petticoats, to take to some wretched old women in the almshouse, and read three pages of Fordyce's sermons to young women while I was dressing for dinner, and felt in a

most delightful frame of mind until the next day, when I lunched at Lord Spireton's. There were some London men there whom I had not expected, and one of them paid me so much attention that I wished I had put on my best bonnet, and not been so precipitate with Johnny; but I think I could have survived his compliments, had not a speech of Lord Spireton's opened my eyes completely to my folly: it was—

“Your rector seems a very deserving young person, Mrs. Lance; my chaplain has the highest opinion of him. Did I not meet his father once at your house?”

“Good gracious!” I thought; “*my* future husband to be condescendingly commended as a deserving young person! and by that horrid Mr. Smith! Only fancy *me* being called a deserving young person: which, of course, I should be, if I had him. That determined me! I had a solemn interview with him that very evening, when I told him I was not good enough for him (pretty near the truth, I'm afraid), and should only be a stumbling-block in his way, instead of a helpmeet. I cried, too, and brought in a verse out of the Bible, begged to be considered as a sister, and all that sort of thing, and took him in beautifully. I have hated to think of it ever since; but it would have been worse had I married him without loving him, would it not?”

“Does he come just the same as before?” asked Constance, evading the question.

“No, only when he can't help it. You may try and comfort him, if you like. Oh! it is half-past one o'clock: what a fright I shall be in the morning with sitting up so late! Good-night, dear: remember this is all sacred between us.”

“Good-night,” and, glad of her departure, Constance laid her weary head upon her pillow; though she could

not sleep for pondering over Mrs. Gabriel's and Nelly's novel illustrations of unselfishness and morality, which were utterly unlike those virtues as she had been accustomed to view them. Alas! the world that but three days ago had seemed so scandalised and maligned, was already losing its apparent brightness. She thought, too, of Nelly's precious gifts and best years sacrificed at the shrine of folly and vanity. Would all the friends of her childhood lose so much when seen with the eyes of ripened understanding? Her last waking thoughts were given to her father; but these she would not analyse, and a few tears lingered on her eyelashes as they at length closed in sleep.





CHAPTER XVI.

SEEDS OF HATE.

BEFORE the family thought of stirring the next morning, Constance had left the Manor and reached her old home in the village; she contrived to enter unobserved, and nearly frightened the little servant into a fit, by her sudden appearance in the kitchen.

"They bean't down yet," was the reply to her inquiry for her uncle and aunt; "and they takes their wittles in the parlour now, for they expects company as mightn't like eating in the kitchen."

So she went into the little sitting-room, which appeared to have become darker, and smaller, and shabbier than ever, and busied herself in arranging the large Bible, and the silver sugar-basin and cream-jug, which she had brought for John and his wife from London. The Misses Vyvianne would have wept, could they have known how much of their last quarter's allowance to Constance had gone to decorate the table of a Methodist parson!

John came down first; he looked at the stranger for a moment with perplexity, but his loving heart soon told who stood before him. Before greeting her, however, he ran back to the foot of the stairs, and called excitedly for his wife,—so excitedly, that the good lady came

quickly down, with her dress unhooked, and her mouth full of pins, to learn the reason of his agitation. She, too, joined in his acclamations of unfeigned welcome; and had the fastidious major beheld his daughter laughing and crying in concert with people who murdered the king's English and rejoiced in steel forks and pewter teaspoons, assuredly he would have been horror-struck.

It must be confessed that, after the first emotion, when Constance was allowed to sit quietly beside the worthy couple while they breakfasted, *she* regarded the pewter spoons, and the constant approach of the knives to the lips, with horror; and was glad she might decline partaking of the repast, under plea of the impending breakfast at the Manor. All these things had never struck her in her girlhood: but she, too, was changed; perhaps also for the worse.

"Papa is sure to come here to-day," she said, as she took leave: *not* feeling at all sure that he would.

"Mind you come with him, then," said Mrs. Gittens, licking her knife, preparatory to helping herself with it to salt, "for I shouldn't know what to say, and you, being a fine scholar, can talk in his own fashion about unicorns and rhinoceroses, and such like India animals: I never gave my mind to such outlandish fry; but of course it's right and proper that them as mixes with 'em should."

"Her poor mother would have been frightened of such a grand-looking daughter," said John, admiringly, as Constance turned back to kiss her hand to him, before she passed out of sight. "Ah! poor Louey, she's best where she is."

With a light heart, Constance ran over the dewy fields. This hearty welcome had fallen refreshingly on her yearning affections, and the sweet morning air, the glit-

tering sea, the open country, the delightful sense of strong health, the freedom from restraint and from the formal regularity of the life at King's Rest, all dispelled the fears of the preceding night; the disappointment she had hardly dared to acknowledge in her father's character, her regret for Nelly's frivolity, and her own dread of herself becoming a mere selfish worldling, vanished before this sparkling scene, this pure, elastic breeze.

Bolton might well call his morning scamper "a fresher:" there is certainly no enjoyment so exquisite and so satisfying as a ramble by the sea before breakfast on a fine spring morning, far enough away from habitations to permit of our indulging in eccentric movements and in unconnected spontaneous bursts of quotations, without incurring the suspicion of a looker-on as to the state of our intellect. How, at such times, the best part of our nature rises in mute adoration to the beneficent Maker of the lovely world before us: and how all mean thoughts shrink away abashed, before the pure fair light of youthful day!

The major might well turn with complacent admiration as his daughter entered the breakfast room, rosy and fresh with youth and beauty; he said nothing, but Mr. Lance put down his letters to exclaim,

"Here she is, prettier than any goddess I ever saw: she's stolen all the sweets of my garden. Ah! Vyvianne, I've had a share in her bringing up; I think I may claim a daughter's salute, eh?"

She kissed him laughingly and blushing, and then approached her father. He kissed her forehead lightly, and, holding both her hands, whispered fondly,

"And how is my little girl after her journey?"

Almost the only lesson of Mrs. Gittens's inculcating which had taken deep root was an intense horror of af-

fectionation, and her father's whisper, so dexterously audible, the paternal manner so becomingly assumed, grated on Constance's feelings. He looked so young and handsome, and was so perfectly satisfied with himself, as he furtively glanced aside to see how Miss Lance appreciated his behaviour, that the girl felt herself only a convenient medium for showing off his charming and interesting manner. There was no tenderness in his kiss, no fond light in his handsome eyes.

A kiss is more eloquent than words—as full of meaning as a look. We all remember how in our childhood we appreciated our nurse's command to “give the lady a pretty kiss,” and the feeling with which we pressed our soft, rosy mouth, to the hard, and often bristly lips of some spectacled, formidable female ogre, who condescended to stop us in our walk: there was certainly no *tender* meaning there. Then again, in the same early period of our lives, there was the kiss of reconciliation; generally a dash at a dark, wet, averted face, after which a strict watch had to be kept upon our movements, while we scowled daggers at each other in the lull that followed from opposite sides of the nursery. So on through the gradations of youth up to manhood, how seldom does lip meet lip with the impassioned thrilling tenderness, or the calm, clinging embrace that alone merits the name! Sorrow and parting, and some great and uncommon emergency can call forth that mute, fleeting, ecstatic caress, that essence of all earthly bliss; but, generally, only the widowed mother as she blesses her sleeping boy on the eve of his departure to fight his way through the world, and the heart-broken mourner bending over the leath-stricken form of the nearest and dearest, taste in all its sad sweet intensity, the full power and undying eloquence that can be concentrated in that little motion

familiarly called a kiss. Happy lovers may fancy themselves enraptured as their smiling faces meet in playful fondness; they are but as children sporting with the empty bubbles of the heart's deep current.

But the major's embrace passed muster with the lookers-on, and he at once took his place among them as prime favourite. He evinced so much interest in the health of his hostess, expressed such deep concern on hearing she had a headache, and talked so wittily and elegantly on all subjects, that Mr. Lance forgot to express his surprise at the non-appearance of the young couple, until, when breakfast was half over, Gabriel entered the room.

He wore a suit of clothes the exact counterpart of the major's, and by the solicitude with which he asked the latter's opinion as to the fit, it was easy to see that he, also, took him at his own high valuation.

"Something new, Gay?" asked his father.

"Yes, father; you see the major gives his mind to this sort of thing. Stultz and he promised to do them all right, don't you see? I, being a family man, have other things to think about, and what suits Vyvianne is sure to suit me: we're pretty much the same figure, eh?"

"Don't flatter yourself! Where is Annie?"

"Ah, well! don't you see, we didn't know you breakfasted so barbarously early: how can you expect a man to feed again so soon after last night's supper? But don't alter your hours for us; I'll soon fall into yours, I dare say."

"Make yourself perfectly easy," cried Nelly, stroking his hair, as she placed some coffee before him: "we did not contemplate altering them. When you are in Turkey, you must do as the Turks do. But where is Annie?"

"Annie! oh, ah! she gave me a message, but you all talk so fast, I forgot it. Oh, this is it; please let her have some breakfast up stairs, she has a headache."

"Knocked up with travelling," Mr. Lance feared.

"Perhaps so; but it's her little boy's birthday, too, and she's so sensitive, don't you see? been crying, and that sort of thing; hasn't got him here, you see, and all that."

"Poor girl!" cried his father and mother; while Nelly suggested that a plum pudding at dinner would be a delicate compliment, under the circumstances.

"Ah!" exclaimed Gabriel, taking his sister's banter in a literal sense, "an excellent idea: you were always a sharp little thing, Nelly; I'm sure she'd be pleased."

"Meantime," said Nelly, preserving her gravity unbroken, "she will want some food to sustain her till it is ready. Just tell Jones what to order for her, there's a good boy."

Gabriel turned to the butler, and in a serious and earnest manner asked,—

"Well, Jones, what do you think of a fresh egg, eh, Jones?"

"Very good, captain, I should think."

"Very well, Jones, then just tell them, will you, to let Mrs. Gabriel have one, and some nice toast, eh? and some tea, and all that sort of thing, don't you see? and perhaps a thin bit of bacon: no cinders, Jones! and——" becoming quite eloquent as he found the business less difficult than he had expected—"I dare say she'd like a suspicion of something green; that weedy stuff that harbours centipedes and those sort of animals: what's its name—oh! cress, you know. Well, then, Jones, I think that will do, eh?"

"I should think so," said Nelly, *sotte voce*.

"Oh, stop, Jones: ah! I'm glad I remembered; she's very fond of some sort of cake, called after some old woman—I dare say you know it—Betty or Sarah, or something. Vyvianne, do you recollect? we all liked it in London."

Nelly hid her laughter behind her cup, while the major calmly remarked,

"Sally Lunn?"

"Ah! yes, thank 'ee, Vyvianne; yes, that's the female. Now Jones?"

"Don't know no one in these parts of that name, captain."

"Gwacious! I don't want the individual, but the cake! However, never mind, I dare say she'll manage without."

"Well!" said Nelly, in a whisper only audible to Constance and the major: "I am thankful he's only my brother."

The major replied in the same low tones.

"He has so many good qualities, one can overlook his few weak points."

A speech that raised the speaker several degrees in Nelly's opinion: so true it is that, while we can all abuse our own relations, we are offended if a stranger remarks upon one fault.

So she said, with a drooping glance towards him,

"Thank you. You are right; he is a dear old fellow: but I had forgotten his little peculiarities, and they struck me as so absurd."

"Tell Annie," said Mr. Lance, as he rose from the table, "to be quite well by dinner time, for I want her to look her best."

"What's up, then, father?"

"The Spiretons, Cravens, and all that set are coming,"

cried Nelly, "and a lot more in the evening for a dance. Constance and I mean to try and cut your wife out."

"Ah!" Gabriel exclaimed, "you are two nice-looking girls, but you can't cut Annie out. She lights up amazingly, don't she, Vyvianne?"

"She is an acknowledged belle," was the answer; "but," he added, with a smile that disclosed his handsome teeth, "Miss Lance can have no fear of anyone."

"Oh! come, Vyvianne, none of that now! I say, Nelly, don't you believe a word he says; he's the greatest flatterer in the presidency—I mean in England. Ah! ah! ah!" and off he sauntered to see how Annie fared.

By-and-by Constance found herself alone with her father, and told him of her morning's visit to the Gittenses, adding, "You will go and see them to-day, or to-morrow, will you not? They will be so proud if you do, papa."

The implied compliment mollified his rising anger.

"Ah!" he said. "Well! perhaps it will be expected; but they must not try to push themselves in here: we must not bring any annoyance upon the Lances."

"You need not be afraid; neither uncle nor aunt would go anywhere unless sure of a welcome."

He fidgeted with his seals, and seemed weighing his thoughts before putting them into words. At last he said, hesitatingly,

"I had better tell you once for all, that I particularly object to you calling those good people uncle and aunt. The lady" (Mrs. Gittens would have preferred being spoken of as a woman or a female, rather than a lady, in that sneering manner,) "has not the shadow of a right to such a title: and, in fact, Constance, I do not choose you to speak of Mr. Gittens in that familiar manner."

"But, papa, he is mamma's own brother!"

"If your mother had lived," he said, hurriedly, "it would have been very different. And yet I don't know; she had the sense to see that her marriage raised a high barrier between her and her relations. Don't answer me!" he said, as he observed her heightened colour. "In a year or two you will look at these things in the same light as I do. Your present sentiments may be very natural and good, but they don't answer, in this world." He put his hand on hers caressingly, as he added, "You must try to believe that I have your good at heart, my darling."

"Yes, papa; but——"

"Not another word. I do not choose you to be intimate with those people; and if they will not understand their proper place, I shall enlighten their ignorance."

"Oh, no, papa! pray do not! Indeed, uncle—I mean Mr. Gittens—will never cause you any annoyance! But," and her own high spirit flashed forth as she added, "why did you send me to them?"

He looked at her in wonder at her daring to question his actions; but there was no offensive meaning in her clear eyes, only something that constrained him to soften his tone, instead of bidding her be silent, as he first intended. He replied,—

"There was no other to whom I could send you without preparation, and your health was in a very bad state; besides, I promised your mother. But now, if you wish me to go through the ceremony, let us visit them at once: everyone seems out of the way; but, remember, I shall not repeat the civility."

As they walked across the fields, he asked,

"Is there no other branch of the family besides John Gittens in this place?"

"Yes, a Mrs. Frampton."

"Whom did she marry? A farmer, did she not?"

"Yes. Shall you go and see her?"

"Certainly not. Really, Constance, you are the most philanthropic girl I ever knew."

"I don't care about the Framptons," she interposed, hastily; "I never was very intimate with them: but you may see the eldest son some day at the Manor: he has had a college education."

The major stopped short to laugh and exclaim, scornfully,—

"A college education! And meet him at the Manor! Do you mean to tell me he visits the Lances?"

"He did, during an election some years ago; but I think he was only tolerated for the time. But you will be civil to him if you ever meet him, papa?"

Something prompted her to bespeak his forbearance; though, as she did so, she wondered.

"I shall have nothing to do with him," he exclaimed. "A low, pushing sort of fellow, no doubt: but do let us drop the subject. Ah! how pleasant this is!"

The cool air and the smiling scene were grateful to him; he lifted his hat to let the breeze fan his brow, and as it raised his curly hair, in which no tell-tale gray was visible, he set aside all disagreeables, and laughed and talked boyishly.

Constance was glad enough to humour his bent. She said, smilingly, as he ran down the green slope with all the enjoyment of a school-boy, "You are too young and nice-looking, papa, for me to pay you the respect due to your venerable title."

She had already discovered his vulnerable point, and, wishing to make the impending visit pass off harmoniously, she felt justified in making use of her discovery.

He gave her his hand, and they walked on, swinging their arms between them as children do, while she amused him with anecdotes of Mrs. Gittens's eccentricities, illustrated so merrily that he quite enjoyed his walk. He was never insensible to the charm of a pretty woman, though that woman had the misfortune to be his daughter, and was highly pleased to find wit and good humour conspicuous in her disposition; he, like most men, having been accustomed to find foolishness bound up with beauty.

Their knock at the cottage door made an evident sensation. There was an inward rustle of petticoats, a subdued clatter of dishes, and stealthy footsteps crossing the uncovered passage, before the little servant, uncomfortably heated, let them in. The parlour was empty, and redolent of pork and greens, the dinner having been hastily taken out of it while the visitors waited outside; but Mrs. Gittens in her best cap, and John in his pulpit suit of black, soon made their appearance, and by their respectful bows, and subdued voices, craved the major's forbearance and kindness.

Without doubt the major's manner savoured of his imperial ancestor; but his overstrained affability passed with his hosts as the essence of gentility, and so impressed them, that Mrs. Gittens thought it wiser not to address his daughter as Betsy Jane in his presence: indeed she behaved altogether so politely and meekly, that he began to think Constance's description too highly coloured.

John's thoughts were in the past, and he paid unusual deference and respect to his brother-in-law for the loved sake of the fair young sister, whose image was yet bright in his memory. When the major mentioned his sense of the kindness shown to his child, in a tone that to Con-

stance was offensively condescending, the poor man melted into tears at the compliment, and his wife actually murmured her pleasure at having "been of use to the dear girl."

So far all went smoothly ; but fate decreed that unruffled tranquillity might not continue. Just as the major rose to take leave, the garden gate was heard to slam ; there was a sound of loud talking and laughing, the brass knocker was violently assailed, and in a moment the house was inundated with more visitors, consisting of Mrs. Frampton, her two daughters, and a young man of the genus indifferently termed travellers and bagmen.

As the parlour door was thrown open, the major was concealed behind it. Unaware of his presence, Mrs. Frampton, seeing Constance standing before her, heartily congratulated her on her improved appearance, and enclosed her in a broad-spread embrace ; which embrace was followed up by her daughters, who, having performed this cousinly duty, stood back to examine the young lady from head to foot, exclaiming in chorus, "Lor' me ! I shouldn't ha' known you if I'd met you promiscuous like up street at Dulton."

Then Mrs. Frampton, turning round to wipe her glowing face with one of her husband's silk handkerchiefs, became conscious of a figure—to use her own words, "tall, and straight, and uncommon grand, for all the world as if he'd stepped out of the tailor's fashion-book"—looking down upon her : altogether of so very different an appearance from the farmers Smith and Brown, with whom she was in the habit of associating, that in her first surprise she involuntarily stepped back upon her daughters ; who, being not at all desirous of encountering their mother's bulky form, gave way also, and beat a disorderly retreat into the little lobby. There Mrs. Frampton rallied

her ideas, and "was sure she didn't mean to intrude ; didn't know as how Brother John had company," &c.

"It's Martha and her girls, and the young man as is to be married upon the eldest," explained Mrs. Gittens, standing between the two parties.

"Poor Louisa's sister, Sir," added John. "Come in, Martha ; it's Major Vyvianne, poor Louisa's husband, you know."

The major stood his ground manfully ; he shook hands with his sister-in-law and bowed to the young ladies, but utterly ignored the presence of their squire ; who, finding himself not appreciated, retired into the kitchen, where he diverted himself with kissing the maid.

"Good Heavens !" exclaimed the major, as he and Constance at length found themselves outside. "What an awful set ! I was a fool to mar—I mean to send you amongst them. I could not help noticing that vulgar woman, for I was fairly *hors de combat* ; but I really think we'd better leave the place at once : we shall be for ever meeting some of those people, and if Annie Lance sees them, she will let all India hear of my *aristocratic* connections : it would ruin me for life. We must go."

"Oh, papa, indeed you need not fear. Mrs. Gittens is very proud in her way ; *she* will prevent the Framptons from coming near us, if she thinks we don't want them ; and as for Mrs. Gabriel, don't you think she already knows that you married——"

She could not finish the sentence : to say "beneath you," would be to degrade the poor young mother's memory ; he concluded for her.

"Yes," he said, "I dare say it is pretty well known. I was a young fool, led away by a pretty face : but she was very different to those creatures. Well," he added, after

a pause, "I suppose we cannot run away just yet ; but I insist upon your keeping clear of the whole set : and, by George ! if they take any liberties I will speak out ! What is that son like—Roger, I think you call him ?"

"Ah, here is Nelly," cried Constance, grateful for her appearance to interrupt the disagreeable conversation ; "ask her."

Nelly was not in the most comfortable mood herself ; she had just escaped from an interview with the young man in question. He had again implored her to listen to his suit, when she, feeling secure in the protection of her newly arrived friends, unveiled her real feelings without scruple, and openly defied his threats. A very sweet mouth was hers, but its rough side was *very* rough, and it uttered words which were neither honey nor sugar now : she set forth unmistakably, even to his egotistical understanding, the immeasurable distance that had been, and that must continue to be, between them. She had not spared him one iota ; nor had a shadow of pity softened her hard, scornful, taunting explanation. He had served her turn ; she had fooled him to pass away a dull winter, and henceforth he was no more to her than the worm in her path.

Notwithstanding his folly, his self-sufficiency, and his unamiable temper, Roger had sincerely believed in Nelly Lance ; he had for years worshipped her beauty, and his worship would have been sacred, had not she herself lured him to destruction. The bitterest drop in all this bitter draught was to feel and know that he—he who thought himself so deep and far-sighted—had been a mere tool in a woman's hands ; had been the tuneless instrument upon which she had practised the coqueties that were to win some nobler game.

His self-love had buoyed him up to the last : to be-

lieve himself liked, and her hint—almost compulsory though she had since declared it had been—of his position being the only obstacle to her avowal of her attachment, had sunk deep into his heart. He listened silently to her angry, sarcastic words; he was stunned by this unexpected view of the cold heartlessness of her character; she had repulsed him before, but never in this cruel, hopeless strain. Always before, she had soothed, even while she refused; but now he felt the bitter truth in every sentence: and, without attempting to utter a syllable in his own defence, he let her leave him, triumphing over his apparently abject abasement.

He followed mechanically in her footsteps, as she hastily walked away; but he had neither aim nor purpose in so doing. Utter ruin had desolated his hopes; he saw no opening in its dark abyss; he only felt that he was scorned, insulted, trodden upon. "She called me a worm in her path," he muttered: "let's see whether the worm can turn again."

Meanwhile Nelly, smiling sweetly, met the major and Constance, and laughingly answered his question of "I want your opinion of the learned farmer, Mr. Roger Frampton. We have just had the *pleasure* of an interview with some of his distinguished family!" He gave so amusing an account of the rencontre in the Gittens' little parlour, portraying Mrs. Frampton's retreat and imitating the young ladies' "Oh la's!" so merrily, that Constance could scarcely believe he felt aught deeper than a keen sense of the ridiculous: there was neither anger nor disgust in his tone; and yet only a few moments had passed since he had declared himself disgraced and contaminated by the connection. "Now you have heard my opinion," he concluded, "let us have yours, Miss Lance."

"Of Roger?" she cried. "Ah, perhaps I ought to paint him in glowing colours, for he honours me with much attention ; but, if you wish to hear the plain truth, I must say that he is the personification of vulgarity and conceit : in fact, an unmitigated snob."

The major looked down in some surprise at the dimpled mouth that could utter such forcible language.

"I imagined as much," he said. "Then I shall not be slighting a friend of yours, if I decline the honour of his acquaintance, should we ever meet?"

This was just what Nelly wished, to prevent an acquaintance between her quondam and her new admirer ; so she shook her ringlets fascinatingly back as she replied, "Certainly not ! we only tolerated him when Charles wished to be popular at the election time."

"Look !" cried the major. "Who is this rustic Adonis ? What an animal ! I wonder what he intends to represent ?"

Neither of his companions were very comfortable as they recognised the subject of their conversation leisurely approaching them, and while Constance trusted her father would be polite notwithstanding his assertions to the contrary, as in the case of Mrs. Frampton, Nelly hoped he would keep to his word, and at once put down Roger's hopes of friendship.

"Speak of the old gentleman, and behold he is there !" said Nelly, softly : "now prepare to be entertained."

Roger was intuitively aware who the stranger was ; he had time enough as he approached to understand the meaning of Nelly's bland manner as she continued her smiling attentions to her companion, and he was swayed by the impulse of the moment to utter the words most calculated to rouse the major's wrath : standing coolly in the way, he nodded familiarly to his cousin, with a

"How do, Betsy Jane?" and then, stretching out his hand to her father, exclaimed,—

"Well, uncle, glad to see you: how are you after your travels? Wear pretty well, eh?"

"Sir!" cried the major, who, from sheer astonishment at the audacious salutation, was unable to say more.

"Well, I suppose you were poor Aunt Lou's husband, no doubt about that! Been to see the old gent, I suppose? I was strolling this way thinking I should come across you."

The major's rage got the better of his good breeding for once. What! He, the crack swell of the Governor-General's staff! He, the acknowledged model and referee in all matters of taste and skill throughout the Presidency! He, here in the presence of a woman before whom he particularly wished to shine, to be accosted as hail fellow well met, and claimed as uncle, by a person who had been just declared to be the essence of vulgarity, the type of low-bred puppyism! He had the presence of mind, nevertheless, to control the feeling that prompted him to lay his stick on the offender's shoulders; but his looks were uncontrolled, and their hatred and scorn plentifully accompanied the words with which he vented his disgust, — words whose irony stung deeper than blows.

"I must beg to express my entire ignorance," he said, "of you, and all belonging to you, Sir! You are labouring under a strange delusion. I am totally unacquainted with you."

The major held himself very erect, and kept his haughty eyes upon the intruder as he spoke. While Roger, really supposing him to be ignorant of his identity, explained,—

"Lor'! why, Betsy Jane there knows me well enough;

my name is Frampton, and they tell me at home your wife was like me."

The major deliberately raised his glass to his eye, and scanned the speaker from top to toe ; then as deliberately he thus addressed him :—

"Sir, I am unfortunately aware of your name and origin, but, I again repeat, you and yours are neither related nor connected with me in the remotest degree ; and I beg you to understand that any further intrusion on your part will be considered by me as a studied insult, and will be chastised as such. I speak for my daughter Miss Vyvianne, as well as myself. Now we will pass on, if you please."

Even Nelly turned pale at this contemptuous speech, heightened as it was by the major's manner ; but she made no effort to mitigate the effect : she did not even glance towards the unfortunate Roger ; who, no longer in doubt as to his uncle's meaning, uttered a sound like the suppressed roar of an enraged beast, and, without further leave-taking, ran rapidly away.

He knew not and cared not whither. The insolent superiority of the major's and Nelly's words goaded him to madness ; the seductive blue eyes, so alluringly bright, and yet so pitiless, floated before him. He plunged head-long across the meadows, through the long grass, crushing the golden buttercup and tender cuckoo-flower beneath his savage tread ; broke straight through the barrier of the young hedgerows, on and on : only caring to be alone, out of the reach of human eyes. With swift strides, he reached the foot of the cliffs, the green sloping sides of which gently rose from the plain ; then, as he felt the short thymy pasture and beheld the barren solitude, he was free to give vent to his pent-up agony, and flinging himself recklessly down, he rolled to and fro like a madman ;

now cursing Nelly, now heaping maledictions on Major Vyvianne, and now invoking Heaven's wrath upon himself. At last, exhausted with his passion, he crawled wearily up the sunny slope, and having reached the summit, sat down to court the faint breeze from the sea.

Peace was on all around, but the stillness of nature spoke not of peace to him. The gentle call of the plover to his mate, the whistle of the blackbird in the Manor plantations, the hum of the insect world, brought him no soothing balm; the faint splash of the water over the rocks beneath him struck no harmonious chord in his discordant breast; he looked up at the radiant sky, flooded with the dazzling brilliancy of noonday sunshine; he looked on the far-spread country, stretching in varied colouring, miles upon miles; he watched a beetle crawling towards a little bush of golden furze beside him, and yet he noted none of these things: his eyes were but roving as in sleep, while his senses were absorbed with the horrible struggle in his mind. He rose again, and stood at the extreme edge of the cliff—not as if contemplating suicide—coward though he was, he was not cowardly enough for that. Another, and an opposite wish, had sprung up since he had called to God for death. The desire to live, till he had worked out the scheme now seething in his brain: a scheme hateful and damning, that he called revenge!

He knelt down, still on the farthest edge of the cliff, with the gleaming waters beneath him, the azure sky above, the lonely heath around him. He saw there were no witnesses of flesh and blood to the blasphemy about to be enacted, and raising his clasped hands on high, he swore never to rest until this scheme was realised. As he spoke, his eyes fell on a scarlet pimpernel, whose tiny form was softly swaying in the breeze; the hue of its in-

nocent petals suggested a new idea, and he added, with increased passion,—

“So help me Heaven! give me no rest, night or day, till blood washes out my injury. No rest on my death-bed, unless blood cancels our debt!”

As he ceased, a pewit started from her hiding-place in a bed of samphire on the face of the cliff beneath, and with a shrill cry of alarm, winged her way sharply over the precipice. He watched her till she rested on the sparkling water, and then, with black hate and sullen determination for his companions, he retraced his steps to Spireton.





CHAPTER XVII.

"UNACCUSTOMED TO PUBLIC SPEAKING."

AFTER luncheon, at which meal Mrs. Gabriel appeared in excellent health and spirits, there was a grand unpacking in the library, of the presents both gentlemen had brought from India for their relations and friends. Mrs. Gabriel took an active part, treating the major as an elder brother, and Gabriel as a spoilt child : a mode of treatment which seemed to be appreciated in both instances, for Gabriel was quite happy at being ordered to sit still and touch nothing ; except, when he was given hard knots to unfasten, over which his wife had hurt her fingers in vain.

The major's offerings to the ladies were magnificent. "Loot," he called them carelessly, when Mr. Lance demurred at his wife and daughters receiving such costly things ; adding, he was "almost ashamed to offer what cost him so little."

"Loot !" said Mr. Lance. "I thought all that sort of pillaging was stopped. Warren Hastings and Impey paid dearly enough for their loot : you'd better take care !"

"Oh ! of course it is supposed to be put an end to : at all events, presents from the natives to us are not allowable ; but remember, it is nearly twenty years since I first

went out, and when I went on an embassy to the Upper Provinces, my people accepted everything that was offered, and only told me, when it was too late to make restitution."

"Hem!" cried Annie, "a very nice apology!"

"Oh! it does 'em good," said Gabriel, languidly; "they are born black to do our dirty work, are those niggers. What do *they* want with pretty things? I tell you what it is; you know if they were meant to be our equals, they wouldn't have been made black, don't you see?"

"Well done, Gay! clever old fellow," cried Nelly; "so you consider the natives of India as hardware to English china, warranted to stand fire and not show dirt?"

"You don't appreciate fully the originality of his idea," interrupted Annie; "not only does he infer that the very darkness of their skins proves them to be intended for use only, but that the delicacy of our flesh—*his* in particular—is a convincing proof that we are the ornamental part of creation: look at those white hands of his, the slightest stain would spoil their purity!"

The sarcasm in her tone was not perceptible to Gabriel; who, after complacently inspecting his long, tapered fingers, exclaimed,—

"Well, well! poor devils! I'm glad I've done with them: it was warm work trying to keep 'em in order!"

Amongst the major's belongings, not for distribution, was a little knife, curiously inlaid with arabesques of gold on bright steel, which particularly caught Constance's attention.

"What is this?" she asked, holding it up to view.

"Ah," cried Annie, "the Goozerat knife! our old friend! How it recalls our grand theatricals! You re-

collect, Gabriel? My poor Gabriel! you sent the Governor into fits and spoilt our acting."

Gabriel laughed, and said,—

"Ah! that was no end of a joke: try if you can tell my father, Annie. He'll enjoy that sort of thing, eh?"

"Yes, I must tell you," she said, turning to Mr. Lance. "I dare say you know what an old goose the dear boy is. We—that is, the officers and their wives—got up some amateur theatricals for a charity, and the Governor-General and the court people promised to patronise us. Well, we had scenes out of two or three plays—one, which was intended to commence the proceedings—the trial scene in the Merchant of Venice. In this, Gabriel insisted upon showing off, so we gave him Gratiano; who, you know, has only to say, 'Mark, Jew a learned judge,' and vice versâ. No difficulty about that, you will say: but hear what follows. At the rehearsals he did very well, for he was allowed to read his part, and as far as his costume went, he was the character to perfection. But on the real scene of action, when all the notabilities were assembled, he became utterly bewildered in his mind, and while everyone was breathlessly listening to Portia's pathetic speech, he confounded us by screaming out,—

"'Mark, judge a learned Jew!'

"In vain the prompter frantically gesticulated for him to be silent; in vain those beside him pulled his cloak, and frowned in horror at his imbecility; he mistook all their motions for signals to continue, and while poor Major Ward forgot where he was, and stammered, and broke down over the quality of mercy, Gabriel continued to scream alternately about a learned Jew and a Daniel's judgment, till the whole house echoed with laughter. I assure you he had to beat a speedy and ignominious re-

treat before order could be restored. Poor old fellow!" she added, "were you not a dreadful marplot?"

He seemed highly diverted with her candid account, and, shaking his hand at her, said,—

"Ah! never mind; you have brains and that sort of thing for us both, don't you see?" adding, in a low tone of admiration, to his father, "Wit as well as beauty there, Sir! Think she'll do, eh?"

"How sweet is domestic bliss!" murmured Nelly, noting her brother's ardour.

Annie's quick ears heard her words.

"We must have compassion on our weaker brethren," she said, in the same low tone, with a knowing look at her sister-in-law. And this little passage of arms commenced a violent friendship between the two ladies, which both found it convenient to entertain for some time to come.

Constance had hardly heard Annie's anecdote; her eyes were fascinated by the little shining knife which her father had taken from her, and was idly passing his hand over.

"Is it sharp, papa?" she asked.

"Sharp enough to be safe," he said, returning it to her; "but it could be got up to death pitch in a few moments."

She passed her fingers lightly along the edge, and could not help shuddering—why, she knew not.

Her father noticed her, and exclaimed,—

"You silly girl! you are actually quite pale. I hope you are not nervous: there is no greater nuisance under the sun than a nervous woman."

Constance tried to laugh away the strange feelings that possessed her; but as Nelly seized the little weapon, and, throwing herself into a tragic attitude, pretended to be about to strike it into her brother, she was so carried

away by her inward forebodings as to dash forward and clutch Nelly's upraised hand, and was only aroused to a sense of her ridiculous position by the general laugh that followed.

"Pray don't be so affected," the major said, contemptuously; while she, abashed and confounded, had not a word to say in her defence.

"Why, old lady!" exclaimed Mr. Lance, taking her hand, caressingly, "I shall think you are a changeling, if *you* profess to be nervous; we have left you too long with the ghosts at King's Rest! Put the thing away, Vyvianne, my dear boy, or she won't recover her bloom for the evening!"

Gabriel was quite right in declaring his wife lighted up uncommonly well, and as her father-in-law led her from the daylight drawing-room to the closed in dining-room that evening, he felt very proud of her appearance. The squire had an insurmountable objection to daylight dinner-parties; he protested that neither women nor chickens could bear the glaring brilliancy of the table-cloth, which made their complexions sickly, and that fish looked unpleasantly warm under the influence of broad day. It was of no use telling him that women and chickens were not expected to look as white as bleached linen, and that fish could not look too warm, also that candlelight spoilt the appearance of the flowers in the *épergne*; he had, like all easy-tempered people, a spice of obstinacy in his composition, and the trouble would have been greater than the result, could his mind be persuaded to alter when it was once made up, so his wife never dreamed of opposing him: his wish carried the day, as the wishes of the master—always supposing he is not a domestic tyrant—

should ; and Mrs. Gabriel rejoiced greatly thereat, she being fully aware of the softening effect of wax-lights.

She, however, with all her beauty, was not the only object of curiosity to the guests assembled round Mr. Lance to welcome back the heir. The major and his daughter shared the interest excited by the bride and bridegroom. Major Vyvianne's marriage had been freely canvassed afresh in the neighbourhood, since it was known he had returned from India with the reputation of wealth and military renown ; the almost-forgotten minutiae of the stolen and unequal union was revived, and speculations were rife as to whether he would marry again, or remain single for his daughter's sake : who, in the latter case, would be an unexceptionable *partie*. Altogether, the general opinion concerning him was favourable, and his honourable conduct to "that little designing nobody,"—that poor little nobody whose sweet life had literally been shortened by his "honourable" conduct—was talked of admiringly. So the aristocracy of Dorsetshire were prepared to admit him into their ranks.

There is a species of freemasonry among the "upper ten thousand" which enables them to discover the true breed at a glance ; they are also *au fait* in each other's antecedents and ancestors, and would turn up their nose at a "Smith," but "be so glad to know" a "Smythe." Therefore a Vyvianne with the *y* and final *w* was sure of a courteous reception ; and, as Constance rejoiced in this patrician distinction, she was received as easily as her father.

"Poor girl ! she couldn't choose her own mother, you know," was Gabriel's sensible remark : and if the world at large expressed the idea differently, it considered the subject in a similar manner, and agreed that, of course, a Miss Vyvianne must be unexceptionable.

Lord Spireton was one of the guests on this introductory occasion, and having known the major's mother when she was one of the maids of honour to the Princess of Wales—he being a saucy little page-boy in the same household—claimed old acquaintanceship with her son, and requested an introduction to her granddaughter.

The major, affecting an indifference he was far from feeling, called Constance to his side, and briefly made her known to his lordship as "my little girl," keenly noticing his face the while.

Lord Spireton made an old-fashioned bow and an equally old-fashioned complimentary speech, and then, leaning his hand fraternally on Major Vyvianne's shoulder, he exclaimed, with an abundant accompaniment of oaths—which was an old-fashioned custom also,—

"Egad ! I thought your mother the prettiest creetur ever born—took the shine even out of the Gunnings, in my fancy ; but I'm obleeged to own that this little girl of yours has as much beauty, and more, for hers isn't spoilt by your mother's d—d haughtiness that made all the men afraid of speaking to her. Take her to court," he added ; "she'll make her fortune if you manage properly : there's a sad lack of youth and beauty at the drawing-rooms nowadays ; even poor old Charlotte's decent set were superior to the present. Take her to court, my dear boy."

But this advice was not exactly acceptable, for the major's own fortune was his first consideration ; when that was settled there would be plenty of time to look after hers : she was young enough to wait a while. At the same time, he was much elated at the old man's encomium on her style, *because* she was *his* daughter ; any gaucherie of hers would have caused him to dislike her, and the fear lest she should be in any way contaminated by

"those low people the Gittenses," made him watch her every movement, though without appearing to do so. He could see nothing but graceful ease, however, watch as he would and did ; and, having arrived at this agreeable conclusion, he still denied her any credit, comfortably believing that the virtuous condescension of his boyish marriage was thus rewarded in the presentability of its offspring.

It was the fashion of that period of which I write, not only to propose healths at private dinners, but also to make elaborate speeches with each toast ; which, like the funeral orations of a little earlier date, all but defied the subjects, endowing them with talents and virtues that had hitherto been undiscovered. Of course Gabriel's return was a fine excuse for a great many additional bumpers, and accordingly as soon as the cloth was removed, Mr. Craven, as the oldest friend of the family, got on his legs and challenged all present to join him in wishing happiness *ad libitum* to the newly-married couple ; declaring that for his part he believed them both to possess, in no small degree, everything to make life desirable."

Annie sat biting her lips, and playing with her dessert knife and fork, as she heard herself invested with such glowing virtues ; while her husband "hear-heard" with the rest at his own praises, and drank to his own health and prosperity, with the most delightful complacency.

"He'll never be able to return thanks," said Nelly to her neighbour ; who, as usual, *chanced* to be the major.

The latter discreetly withheld his private opinion, merely saying,—

"Look, he seems quite ready !"

In fact Gabriel rose with surprising alacrity, as if ready primed for a grand effect, and without any hesitation he at once began,—

"Ladies and gentlemen!"

Having got thus far, he cleared his throat, picked up his dinner napkin, and carefully placed it on the back of his chair; this done to his mind, he began again,—

"Ladies and gentlemen!"

At this point he stopped again, and rearranged the fruit-dishes in his immediate vicinity; then, having succeeded in completely destroying the symmetry of the table, he hastily repeated with raised voice,

"Ladies and gentlemen!"

"Here we are," cried Nelly, softly; while Annie found it expedient to open her fan, and screen her laughter behind it.

"I—ah! am quite unaccustomed to public speaking," continued he, "and all that sort of thing, you know; but I wish to endeavour, don't you see? to——" another interval, while he again straightened the strawberry-dish, and smilingly acknowledged some "hear-hears" as a just tribute to his eloquence—"to," he added, when silence was restored—"ah, don't you see?—acknowledge your kindness, unaccustomed as I am, as I told you before, to public speaking; but I am sure I—and Annie also—am very much obliged to you all, and I'm only sorry that I *am*, ladies and gentlemen, unaccustomed to public speaking, for your sake. I hope you'll excuse a long speech; and I beg to propose all *your* very good healths, ladies and gentlemen, and wish you all the proper sort of thing: don't we, Annie?—and I'm—that is, we are, very much obliged to you all, and—there you are, you know."

A more ludicrous blending of folly and pathos could not be. His lounging attitude, as he swayed gently to and fro; his wide-open light blue eyes sweetly unconscious of the polite attempts of his hearers to hide their

amusement ; his soft cordial tones, his complete self-satisfaction, and the proud glances of admiration he cast on his wife, were extraordinary. But the elders, who remembered his good-natured boyhood, listened to the entangled attempt with indulgence ; and even the younger guests, who only knew him as he was at present, were lenient because of his beauty and *bonhomie*, his pretty wife, and his father's good wine !

Nelly looked at her sister-in-law, but read no vexation in her smiling countenance : Mrs. Gabriel's experience with her "lost pet" had taught her to be tolerant of the infirmities of that sex. The "dear departed" had a fair share of human frailty ; having had all Gabriel's worst, without any of his redeeming good qualities. In truth, the only good action of which *he* was ever guilty was when he died and vanished from the scene ; and that, to be sure, was certainly not of his own will. So everyone professed great delight with the young man's speech ; old John being the only dissenter : he having listened at the door with the other domestics, remarked, with greater truth than politeness, to his friend the cook,—

"To my mind, he's only fit for your place, cook : he makes a capital hash ! Ah ! he's very well to look at, is Master Gabriel ; but there's no go in him. Master Bolton ! Lor ! he's the chap for my money, he be !"

A very different affair was the major's response, when his health served as an excuse for another bumper. Manly vigour and soldier-like terseness of language, recommended him to the gentlemen ; while a judicious sprinkling of Eastern metaphor, and a dash of sentiment, captivated the attention of the ladies. Constance, looking up at his animated handsome face, and listening to his clear, well-modulated voice, felt doubly proud of her father ; and yet his harangue, with all its brilliant

imagery and command of words, lacked the genuine feeling that had pervaded poor Gabriel's spasmodic failure.

The gentlemen had special orders from Miss Nelly not to sit long over their wine, on account of the dancing afterwards; but Lord Spireton chose to follow his own inclination, which had long ago led him *from* the hall *to* the banquet: *his* enjoyment consisting in drinking freely, and his argument being, that as he had reached the three-score years and ten allotted to man, it didn't much matter if he did exceed his sober two bottles a day—it couldn't spoil his constitution now; therefore, as he persisted in keeping his seat, his host was constrained to keep him company; and the young men's sense of decorum (a sense quite lost to posterity) forbade their rising from the table before their elders.

Such being the state of matters, it was in vain that Nelly thundered on the piano with a design to quicken the tardy beaux. In vain all the young ladies who possessed voices, and a great many that did not, warbled their sweetest ditties; the boisterous laughter from the dining-room continued, and when the last songstress arose from the piano, and received the faint "thank you's" of her female auditors, who were all wondering how *she* dare "squall" before anyone,—Nelly was in despair: she could not ask them each to begin again; she knew it was unfair to expect them to show off before only petticoats; such a waste of sweetness on desert air! What could she do? her eyes fell on Constance; perhaps she could play a little, so "Con, dear" was walked off to the music stool; and to Nelly's surprise, and perhaps chagrin, without any hesitation or diffidence commenced a song.

Lord Spireton, in the dining-room, was waxing merry,

and slightly improper, over his wine anecdotes ; his favourite story had been duly applauded—perhaps on the score of old acquaintanceship, and he had begun another, prefaced by his letting the nutcrackers fall purposely to the ground, which permitted him to exclaim, “Bless me ! what’s that ? I thought it was a gun ! Talking of guns reminds me of a curious circumstance,” &c. ; when a servant entering the room with a fresh supply of wine, let in the sound of a full clear voice, soaring steadily and melodiously in practised cadences.

The old lord stopped in his prosing, and listened attentively.

“Hallo !” he cried. “What, Lance ! have you got Catalani there ? that’s worth hearing, eh ?”

“I don’t know the voice,” said the squire ; “is it your wife’s, Gabriel ?”

Gabriel said no ; and then the old lord said perhaps it was the major’s pretty daughter ; at which the major shook his head, and said he feared not.

“Take twenty to one it *is*, though,” said Lord Spireton ; “let’s go and see.”

And with some curiosity the gentlemen entered the drawing-room, just as Constance’s concluding notes were floating softly away. The old earl marched straight up to her.

“Congratulate me on my penetration,” he cried, with a courtly bow. “I said it must be you making so sweet a noise. Ah ! that I had been born half a century later, for your sake.”

The major said nothing ; but he placed his daughter’s hand on his arm, and presented the agreeable picture of a proud and happy father : inwardly hoping that the interesting spectacle was duly observed.

“Who would have expected her to be so self-

possessed?" said Nelly to her sister-in-law; who replied,—

"Well, it is a good, strong, well-cultivated voice; but much of it would make my head ache: I should prefer it in the open air. Pray let us go to the dancing-room at once."

For a little while, Constance entered with zest into all the dissipation of which this party was the beginning: the unwonted excitement was what she had so long sighed for. For a little while, all was *couleur de rose*; but as the novelty wore off, so did her pleasure decline. As the lovely summer drew near, she began to regret the long evenings wasted in her dressing-room, and the exhaustion of the morning, which obliged her to remain and seek rest in bed; then, as her mind gradually recovered its equilibrium, she was able to question the enjoyment of hearing the same insipid compliments night after night, of meeting the same indifferent *local*-minded people, of inhaling the impure air, of eating unwholesome messes to satisfy an artificial appetite, and then, when dead tired, of being jolted, "sitting bodkin" in the chariot, over rough roads for distances varying from three to sixteen miles, with the calm, pure beauty of dawning day mocking her own and her companions' jaded looks and discontented feelings.

She went through all the varieties of unmitigated delight, of mere pleasure, of toleration, and, lastly, of utter weariness, before she ventured to ask to be left at home occasionally. Mrs. Lance was glad enough to permit her to play the truant, and to keep her company; for Mrs. Gabriel could chaperone Nelly with all propriety. So, after a little resistance, they were suffered to go or stay according to their wills; which generally suffered

the others to drive off to their parties, while they sauntered over the cliffs, and strolled about the gardens, now fragrant with summer flowers, till the declining day passed almost imperceptibly into the soft gloaming of the night, and the nightingale took up the unfinished song of the sleepy thrush, and piped to the blushing roses, which hung their glowing heads as if faint with the richness of their own perfume. The hush of the country, the quiet beauty of the darkening ocean, the soft, scented air, and her kind, sensible companion, were more congenial to Constance's mind: and yet her restless heart was only half satisfied. It was not till these blooming roses had withered and died—till the light had faded from her life, and these innocent hours existed only in her recollection, softened by the enchantment of retrospection—that she comprehended their full enjoyment, and wondered she had not prized them more.

It was the axiom of Mr. and Mrs. Lance to let their guests have their own way; and herein lay the great secret of enjoyment. The ladies were not required to sit together doing stupid embroidery all the morning; neither were the men expected to prefer the stables and the billiard-room; and if anyone liked to breakfast in their bed-room, or to absent themselves from the luncheon-table, they were not pestered with well-meant regrets and inquiries, but simply made welcome when they did appear, and quietly considered and cared for.

"I like to lie on the top of an unfinished stack, and look up at the sky," Mr. Lance used to say, "but I don't expect my friends to have the same ambitious taste. I like you," he said to Major Vyvianne, as they were taking their after-dinner smoke, "for you don't require amusing, and you talk away, without expecting me to answer every moment. Why should I cry 'Ah!' and 'Hm!'

and 'Yes,' and try to look excitedly interested while a man speaks to me? Of course, one hears all the time! There's Craven now, as good an old fellow as can be—he was talking to me the other day, and because I did not stop smoking, and appear insanely astonished, he said, 'Perhaps you don't care to attend to me?' as though I was to lose the prime of a first-rate cigar to keep up a running accompaniment of ejaculations because one of his stacks had fired. 'Well,' I said, 'I'm listening: I suppose it's all right now?' 'Oh,' he cried, 'I was about to tell you, but——' 'What the deuce,'—I said, for wasn't it provoking?—'do you want me to interrupt you, then, for? I'm neither deaf, nor idiotic; I'll say all that is necessary when you've done.' You see he was brought up by women, and never allowed to smoke—a thousand pities, but it can't be helped now: it's very surprising how he manages to get over the time."

Gabriel, who had been in earnest conference with his wife and sister, here joined the smokers, and, after an expressive glance at the major, said, *à propos* of nothing,—

"Annie's sister is in London."

"Ah!" exclaimed his father.

"Annie hasn't seen her since her marriage," continued Gabriel.

"Better ask her here."

Gabriel twisted his cigar, and walked some distance before he saw his way clear to his next observation.

"Why, don't you see," he said, at last, "she has to sail for India in a fortnight, and I suppose she couldn't spare the time to come so far; there's the outfit, don't you see, and that sort of thing to get."

"Well, then, what's to be done?" said the squire, whose ideas moved very little faster than his son's.

Gabriel winked and frowned at the major to come to his rescue; but the major wouldn't see, so a fresh cigar was scientifically licked and lighted, and approved, and then Gabriel was sufficiently nerved to go on unsupported.

"Well, Annie was thinking—you see, Annie is so devoted to her family and that sort of thing—the only way would be for us to run up to town, don't you see—eh?"

"To be sure," was the easy answer; "you must consult her wishes first now, my boy. You can come back again, you know, or join us at Higmoor later on. Anything she and you think best will suit us."

"Thank ye, father." He was vastly relieved, knowing in his heart that the speedy departure of Annie's sister was but an excuse for them to enjoy some of the gaieties of the London season. But the squire suspected nothing of the scheme: not even when the major, who was ready enough to speak when it was for himself, presently remarked, that as Gabriel and his wife were going, he might as well take advantage of their company and travel at the same time.

"Eh, what?" he said, with no little disappointment in his tone; "all wanting to run away! No, no, Vyvianne, we can't spare you and the child just yet. Bless me! what would my wife do without Constance?"

However, with skilful manœuvring, the squire was gradually brought round to the young people's plan, and when the idea of Nelly's accompanying her brother was mooted, it seemed the most natural thing in the world, and such a good opportunity for her to see Bertie and her new baby. However, he did not at all like being left behind, and at last discovered that he also had business in London.

Would it not be better, therefore, that the whole party should go *en masse*?

This patriarchal mode was decidedly objectionable to the young men, and Nelly and Annie exchanged signals of distress. Mrs. Lance negatived the idea at once. Her husband would be in good quarters with Lord Charles if he went as a bachelor; she hated the smoke and heat of town; clearly, there was no necessity for her to forego the pleasure of the garden; and, for her, very decidedly did she protest against such a proceeding.

"You cannot be left alone, dear," cried Nelly, with a fascinating sacrifice of self; "*I* will stay with you; Bertie's baby will keep."

The major looked at her aghast. Had he not successfully originated the London visit, and had she not abetted it with delight? An instant's reflection showed him that the young lady would not so readily sacrifice herself on the altar of domestic affection, were she not certain that her offering would not be accepted.

Mrs. Lance's reply was characteristic.

"My dear Nelly, I would not deprive you of the pleasure of seeing Bertha for worlds."

The squire was perplexed for a moment, then he said,—

"There's the child; perhaps she will stay behind as a hostage for her father. Eh! what do you say, child?"

Mrs. Gabriel's foot softly touched her sister-in-law's, while she said, sweetly,—

"Oh! no, indeed, *we* cannot spare Constance!"

Mrs. Lance looked eagerly at the girl, and Constance smiled back at her kind eagerness. In her inmost heart, she was contemplating the change with some uneasiness; she felt that Annie and Nelly had many secrets unshared by her, and that when her father was among

his friends in London her presence would be rather a bore to him. How could she expect him, a handsome and still a young man, to leave his gay bachelor friends, his club, and his parties, to escort a grown-up daughter about? Day by day, these feelings had strengthened, and as she watched him, always the favoured guest, the admired beau, smiled upon by the prettiest girls, flattered by the mammas, and courted by the brothers, she could not help acknowledging—although his attention to her never varied—that she was *de trop* on the scene; so she said, in reply to Mr. Lance's inquiry,—

“I have had plenty of London lately, and I should like to stay with you, Mrs. Lance: papa would be more independent without me; but I will be guided by him, please.”

“They're very good reasons: you are a sensible girl, my dear. Now, Vyvianne, what have you to say?”

The major gracefully thanked both the ladies for their kindness in wishing for his little girl's company; he preferred that she should decide for herself. He need not assure her that she could never be in his way; at the same time he agreed with Mrs. Lance in thinking Spireton highly preferable to that noisy London. He laid his hand caressingly round his daughter's neck as he spoke.

With a blush, she turned to him, and said,—

“I like being with you; but, perhaps, I should be an inconvenience at an hotel: you understand what I mean, papa?”

He looked down into the soft, moist eyes, and did understand that, had he cared to try for it, his daughter's love would be his in weal or woe, would cover and overlook all his failings, and would gird him about with the all-enduring shield of pure devotion. But woman's devo-

tion was nothing new to him ; he had been accustomed to it all his life, and generally it bored him. As yet he stood strong, reliant on himself, his manly vigour and beauty, and his easy fortune ; he wanted no tender solicitude : he himself sufficed for his own happiness, therefore it suited him to set aside the proffered love in that up-turned face, and to say, with a manner wonderfully like the "genuine article," but which Constance read aright,—

"You are a dear little unselfish thing : but I can see you want to be left behind. I will consider it over, my darling, till to-morrow."

In the morning he followed her into the garden before breakfast, and told her he feared he must forego the pleasure of having her with him, as the Lances had been so disinterestedly kind, and as she now had it in her power to please Mrs. Lance.

His *darling* was half disappointed : she had half hoped he would express his disinclination to part with her again so soon ; and at the bottom of her heart lurked a little sting, feeling that Nelly and Annie were more to him than his only child. But her better nature triumphed over these unnatural thoughts ; of course he had business to occupy him in London—the settlement of his army affairs, and commissions of friends in India to execute : he would not be long away neither : and, after all, was it not much better for her to remain at her dear Spireton—the place he knew she loved beyond all others ? So she said, with an unclouded brow,—

"Very well, dear papa ; and shall you return for me, or shall I come to you, when your business is done ?"

"I hardly know yet ; Mr. Lance insists upon our accompanying them to Yorkshire in August ; however, you may rely on my using the utmost despatch in getting

through all my disagreeables, and having you quickly with me again."

He plucked a half-opened rose, and placed it in her hair—a graceful act gracefully performed: perhaps he was aware of the blue eyes watching him from Miss Nelly's window; but Constance having once conquered her painful feelings, viewed the little compliment in a fond light, and linking her arm in his, amused him with romantic plans of rural felicity to be carried into execution on his return.

The major meantime congratulated himself on all having turned out so agreeably; though, to do him justice, he really admired his daughter, and did not wish to get rid of her altogether. In theory, a clever handsome daughter was very delightful; it was only the practice of paternal duties and responsibilities that rather put him out. "He would fall into them by-and-bye, he supposed; but hang it! a fellow must have a look round him, after twenty years' banishment on the other side of the globe!"

"I have a letter from Bolton," Mr. Lance announced at breakfast; "he'll be here in a few days. What's to be done?"

"Poor old fellow!" cried Gabriel. "I should like to see him; but, don't you see, one can't be here and there too?"

"Really your conclusion evinces a wonderful depth of thought," said Nelly, who quizzed him unmercifully when Annie was not present. "I have an idea! He is sure to report himself at the Admiralty directly he arrives in London: we can send a note there to tell him where he will find us; and, to quote another of your sapient remarks, Gay, 'there you are, you know.'"

"Bravo, Nelly!" cried her brother, who bore no malice, but rather liked being laughed at by a woman; "you can see through a stone wall better than most people."

The major announced his decision respecting Constance in charming, flowery expressions to his hostess.

"My dear fellow," said the squire, "don't kill us with gratitude; we are acting in the most selfish way: the truth is, we can't do without the child. You can't think how much we missed her when she went to King's Rest. Pray consider yourself independent of her; this is her legitimate home. When you want to see her, come, and when she is tired of us, she can go to you for a change; but, once for always, do let us understand distinctly that this is her home."

The squire was not given to speechify unless he was deeply interested, and his calm voice trembled as he added,—

"My wife and I are both of one mind in wishing her to look upon us as if we were near relations. I heartily wish we had the right of grandfather and grandmother—eh, Hannah?—over her."

His little jest enabled Constance to suppress her emotion; she said, simply,—

"Indeed, you are very good. Papa knows I am always happy with you."

"I hope that horrid Roger will be out of the way when we come back," said Nelly, the night before her departure. "Your father says he has met him once or twice: he calls him 'that low villain,' and she laughed merrily.

"Papa has not mentioned him to me," said Constance, "only forbidden me to be friendly with the Framptons; he has not said a word against the Gittenses. Do you know if he noticed Roger?"

"Certainly not. Roger scowls at him, and the major calmly surveys him through his glass. I wonder he does not leave the neighbourhood, horrid fellow! Well, dear, I wish you were going with us; but I'll write you all particulars about Bertha and Bolton. I haven't seen him since the election time: he's never had leave, you know. I dare say he'll return with us, and then we'll get up some picnics."

The major took a very loving farewell of his daughter; but as his lips pressed her cheek, and his musical voice murmured, "Good-bye, my darling child," why did Mrs. Gittens's tirade against "flowery humbug" rise to her mind?





CHAPTER XVIII

BURIED ALIVE.

NOTWITHSTANDING Nelly's intention of intercepting Bolton Lance on his passage through London, she had to own herself defeated. He only stayed to dine at Lord Charles Bolton's to meet all the family, to spend the next morning in romping with Bertha's children, and then, without any apology beyond declaring himself homesick, took himself off by the evening coach for Dorsetshire; sitting outside wide awake all through the night, smoking a successor of the old black pipe, cogitating many things (although he had plenty to say to his fellow passengers,) but most of all wondering "what Nelly was up to now," and whether Constance had grown presentable.

The chill of the early morning, the heavy dew that made a thin paste of the last night's dust, and the discontent of his fellow travellers were but as exercises for his patience and good-humour to work upon and disperse; and even when, as the climax to the general misery, a wheel came off in the solitude of the New Forest, he wondered at everyone's grumbling, himself thinking the accident a very good excuse for becoming warm by helping to make matters straight again.

Still eschewing postchaises as "extravagant craft," on

reaching Dulton he announced his intention to walk the remainder of the way home, leaving his luggage to be fetched ; on which the guard, who had noticed his jollity through the journey, observed to the ostler at the "Lion," "The young gent was made of something stronger than pin-wire, for he hadn't closed his winkers all night, and yet was as fresh as a sea-breeze."

Bolton, overhearing this little eulogistic remark, cried out, as he walked off, that his friend was out of his reckoning, for no one could call salt air fresh—a sally that heightened his admirer's good opinion still more.

"My foot is on my native heath, and my name is not McGregor," sang Bolton, as leaving the high road, he followed the sandy tract that, cutting across the heath, past the pits, materially shortened the distance to Spireton. His spirits were very high, notwithstanding the wakeful night ; the rioting breeze and familiar scenes made his heart glad ; presently his gladness found vent in songs, gay sea ditties, to which his quick steps kept time. His clear voice startled the rabbits and pewits from their lonely resting places under the furze-bushes, and rang joyously through the silent air ; but gradually the unbroken solitude, unbroken but by himself, the sweetness of the spicy furze in full golden bloom, and the drowsy hum of insects checked his noisy utterance. He stood still and silent, and let the fair calm of nature sink like the voice of home into his heart ; and when he again pursued his way, a low chaunt, learned from the Bosphorus boatmen, took the place of the Bacchanalian chorus.

As he advanced the scenery grew yet wilder ; he was nearing the diggings now, and miniature mountains rising from miniature lakes, marked the scene of long-deserted pits. Approaching the present works, the untidy heaps of sandstone were unsoftened by Time's kindly

hand, and nature appeared in ugly *deshabille*; tiny homesteads and little clusters of plastered cottages redeemed the deformity in some measure; but Bolton did not notice these things: he could now see the new works, and even before he was near enough to distinguish the features, he felt sure there was something wrong.

There was a large assemblage of people gathered round one spot; not contending, for a breathless silence hung like a spell upon them. He scrambled across the fresh turned heaps, and eagerly questioned a workman.

"A new shaft have fallen in; two men are buried alive!"

"When?"

"Yesterday mornen."

"How? who are they?"

"'Tis old Bob Smith, him as was married upon his third wife last harvest, and young Jim Richards, as haven't worked at pits but two month; they'd just got to bottom when it fell in on 'em. Roberts, him as was at wheel, had a narrow escape of valling in after 'em."

"What are you doing now?"

"We've been diggen ever since. One of 'em must be alive, for we've heard 'em knocking at times: but t' parson there can tell you all better nor I, Zur."

Bolton ran up the mound, where, following the jerk of his informer's thumb, he saw John Craven standing.

"It's a bad business," said the latter, speaking low: "we can't make much way: the shaft has to be made as carefully as if it was required to last years, or it would endanger the diggers' lives; and the poor fellows get so quickly exhausted from the absence of air in that damp hole, that I don't think there's a chance of reaching Smith and Richards alive."

From excited lookers on, from the anxious, hopeless

faces of the relations and friends of the buried, and from the utterly exhausted condition in which the diggers were every five minutes hoisted up from their foul working place, Bolton gathered confirmation of John Craven's fear. The limited space which prevented more than two working at the same time, and the consequent slow progress, precluded hope. So long a time in the bowels of the earth, without food, air, or light—with horror, perhaps, pressing on their brains—how could mortal men live through such torment? There was an absence of order, too, in what was done.

“Where was the master?”

“Absent.”

“The foreman?”

“Utterly overwhelmed by the sudden responsibility.”

There was no electric telegraph then to flash the tidings from south to north; no railway to bring immediate experienced help.

Much had been done: there was a large fire close at hand, and Bolton, in his hasty survey, saw ladies making tea and administering refreshment to every relay of fainting workmen as they emerged from the shaft; but while much was already done, more was required—a head to rule, a hand to guide.

If commiseration could bring relief, the assembled crowd from all parts of the neighbourhood would have sufficed. Bolton was not one to talk without acting: he went up to the hurdle fence that, placed round the shaft, kept off the crowd, and, standing there a few moments, he resolutely set his wits to work. Air was wanted to enable the reeking men to continue their work without utterly prostrating their strength. Air must be obtained to ventilate the noisome cutting.

He had not lived below deck in the tropics without ac-

quiring knowledge of the easiest and simplest means of "raising the wind," and he knew that, even in the dog-days, the Dorsetshire downs abounded in that valuable commodity : how to convey it down that narrow opening ? It sharpened his invention to think that, but a few feet beneath him, his fellow-creatures were panting for lack of that breeze that was raising his hair from his brow—this home breeze that he had been luxuriating in and all but blessing as he walked hither—this glorious wind that, blowing wild from the Atlantic, lost its first sharpness in passing over the sunny islands of the Channel, lingered over the flowery shores of Scilly, and from thence, fragrant with stolen sweets, came meekly to kiss the wild thyme and spicy samphire of the old cliffs of Purbeck.

How to capture this roving, capricious, viewless thing. Feeling confidence in himself, he determined to make the attempt. Already he was well known about home as "a good 'un to go ;" so when he clearly explained his intentions, no one attempted to pooh-pooh, or declare the idea chimerical.

It was an immeasurable relief to all these simple men to have so much responsibility taken from them, and they obeyed his orders with alacrity : his position and reputation prevented rebellion amongst them, and their deep and earnest desire to save their unhappy comrades set aside any feeling of jealousy that he should succeed when they failed. So heartily did they carry out his wishes, that before evening a rough sort of contrivance conveyed the ventilation where it was so greatly needed.

Its immense benefit was soon visible, and the young man was blessed, and complimented on all sides. He went down in the next bucket to test its efficacy, and made a further discovery by his pocket compass. The work of the last ten hours had been in vain : it had been

in a contrary direction to where the dull knocking came from ! All the energy of ten hours, and the protracted anxiety to have been wasted ! And what must have been the feelings of the prisoners, as the sound of the spades became fainter and fainter hour by hour.

The fact was thoughtlessly stated above ground, and the poor old father, and strong young sons, of the victims who all that weary time clustered together close to the fence, and watched each bucketful of workmen ascend from the shaft, shuddered and groaned at the report.

"Poor old Richards !" Bolton said to himself, as, standing idly for an instant, he caught sight of the old man's heart-broken, stony expression ; his withered hands clutching the hurdle for support, his eyes fixed hopelessly upon the dark opening.

"Yes, poor old man !" repeated a soft voice, close to him ; "and we have just heard a report of his only other child having been drowned at sea : he does not know yet, his wife dare not tell him."

Bolton turned, and saw a bright young face, shaded just a little by anxiety ; he recognised a girl whose constant movements about the workmen he had noticed abstractedly ever since his arrival. Now as she seemed to address him, he wondered who she was, and, with a young man's vanity, regretted his disorderly appearance.

She read his thoughts, for a sly glance accompanied her next words, demurely as they were uttered.

"I am sent by Mrs. Lance to beg you will come down to the fire, and have some refreshment."

"Mrs. Lance ! is she here ?"

"Of course ; we have been here ever since daylight, and all yesterday till midnight. Please persuade her to go home early to-night ; she declares she shall stay out."

He put out his hand to assist her down the rough sides

of the plateau, at the foot of which was the fire ; but she turned from him to speak to Richards, whom he could see her earnestly addressing, her hand pressed upon the old man's ; so he went on alone to where his stepmother was.

When she joined them, tears were glistening on her eyelashes :—

“It is of no use,” she said to Mrs. Lance. “I cannot make him attend to anything !” Then she began briskly to cut sandwiches for Bolton, who, lazily lying beside the fire, with his head on his mother's knee, watched her movements, and accepted her sandwiches.

There was little opportunity for conversation, for the demands for Miss Vyvianne were innumerable on all sides. He called to her later on in the evening, to ask if she was not thinking of going home with his mother, as it was getting late.

“No,” she replied ; “I mean to remain here ; it is a treat to me to be up all night : besides, I slept well last night.”

He stopped her, saying,—

“Indeed, you are going home ; my mother cannot go alone. I shall stay here ; I have promised to send for you, if necessary.”

She smiled at his peremptory mood, but answered very gravely,—

“Very well, I will take her home ; but I intend to come back. I particularly wish to see them brought up.”

He said,—

“You had better not be here ; I assure you there is no chance of their being rescued. I have no expectation of reaching them for twenty-four hours longer, either ; if, as we imagine, they are at the bottom of the old shaft : under the most favourable circumstances, they will have space,

but no ventilation. Smith is most likely to struggle with life to the last ; but that poor boy in strong health has no doubt already fallen a victim."

"Oh, Zur ! don't 'ee say that !"

There stood the old father, his hollow eyes full of bitter woe, his purple lips quivering.

"Don't 'ee say that, Zur," he repeated, imploringly ; 't'other has gone drowned, I know, though they think I doan't ; but he's better off in the deep zea, than choked up there in t' clay."

"While there is uncertainty there is hope," said Constance ; "but think of your poor wife, Richards : won't you go and comfort her?"

"I darn't go home to t' missus," he groaned ; "I darn't go home without the lad. I darn't pray, I darn't do nothen ; I've a bad heart, I'm thinking."

His deep grief touched Bolton ; but he affected to speak cheerfully, saying,—

"I'm not going to contradict what you heard me say just now ; but my words, whether for good or ill, won't alter God's intention, my man. We must all have trouble : bear yours like a Christian ! grieving never bettered a bad case. After all, Jim is less to be pitied than old Smith, who had a wife and three lots of children depending on him. Jim has fewer sins to answer for, also. If Providence means him to be delivered, why then no earthly mischance can harm him ; and if he is to die, it won't be so very long before you'll meet up aloft there, never to be parted again."

His hopeful words, plainly, and yet so tenderly spoken, roused the old man from his despondency ; looking into the pitying eyes, he caught somewhat of their youthful ardour.

"That's true enough," he said ; "you put it in a

natural way like : 'tis the parson's business to tell we volk to be thankful even when we're knocked over, but we knows their speechifying is cut and dried for 'em ; now yours aint nothen but what's in reason. I'll go home now, and tell the missus, afore I forget."

He turned to go, but stopped again to take another look at Bolton, as if he would have the reflection of his countenance with his comforting words : the bright bronzed face, the strong upright figure so handsome in its manly prime, struck him painfully.

"Ah!" he muttered, "he knows nought of trouble yet. How can he tell what volk feel when they lose all? t'other was just his size too, and he's down at the bottom of the zea."

"What is it, Richards?" the young man asked kindly, not hearing his words, and thinking he had something more to say to him.

"Nothen, Zur ; only please the Almighty to comfort you when you need it, as you've tried to comfort I."

Bolton escorted the ladies over the *débris* surrounding the pits, and having reached the road within sight of the Manor lodge, stopped to say good-night ; but though the good-bye was said, they still lingered together for a few moments, enjoying the beauty of the quiet night. The huge bonfire made visible the works they had left behind, and the black figures, passing in and out of its glow, looked like spectres in the infernal regions. To the left, a cluster of lights pointed out the pitmen's cottages, where the old mother, the wife, and the children mourned and wailed for those who might never look on the familiar scenes again ; while away before them stretched the long range of hills, backed by the pale brightness of the sky, beneath whose unclouded canopy hung the moon, pour-

ing its soft radiance over all, lighting up a thousand pools into silvery beauty, and investing the tops of the sombre pine-trees with gleaming coronals.

The hum of the workmen was subdued by the distance ; but the cuckoo and the nightingale in the security of the shadowy plantations sang in loud concert with the eternal chorus of the summer waves, and the night breeze stirred the young leaves of the feathery larches to join in the grateful harmony. All nature rejoiced in the solemn loveliness of night, revelling in unfettered freedom as her worldless voice ascended in untaught eloquence to her Maker. Peace was on everything. Beauty reigned supreme : a light word would have profaned the universal purity. Mrs. Lance and Constance went on silently over the moonlight road, and Bolton turned back to the scene of action. Unaffected, but deeply felt, was a yearning in their hearts for that unseen and yet ever pervading future, whose nature and attributes are so mysteriously hidden from the greatest and wisest intellects. A yearning that comes in the happiest moments, and in the fairest scenes ; a sense of incompleteness, a want unsupplied, never to be satisfied till death has thrown down the barrier which our bodies raise between our souls and the wisdom of eternity.

The next day dawned on the same incessant work, the same indefatigable exertions, the same fluctuations of hope and despair. Again all the inhabitants of Dulton and the neighbourhood flocked out to the exciting spot, and again the old father and the young sons stood like statues of grief, regardless of all but their own sad thoughts. All through that day the spectators came and went in awe-stricken silence ; the workmen descended and ascended, but all remained discouraging. Since daylight the knocking which had been heard at intervals

had ceased, and the faces of the men, as they were hoisted up from their tomb-like work, became gradually more anxious and hopeless.

Towards evening, however, an engineer arrived from Southampton. Bolton accompanied him down the shaft, and when the sailor reappeared, his blue eyes wore so beaming an expression, that, even before he spoke, the bystanders knew that there was good news at last. Thoroughly carried away by the excitement he read in the faces crowding round him, he forgot the cruelty of raising hopes that might be fallacious, and lifting his cap above his head, he shouted,—

“We hear the knocking: we’re close upon them. It’s all right! Hurrah!”

Instantaneously the assembly took up the shout, so heartily and joyously, that the women in the village, thinking the rescue was already effected, came running wildly towards them, laughing, crying, and screaming, followed by a tribe of children frantic with excitement because their mothers were.

“A set of fools!” cried the engineer, who was slowly emerging from the shaft. “Stop them, somebody, will you?”

“I’m the biggest fool!” Bolton muttered; while Johnny Craven, enforcing silence by emphatic gestures, exclaimed,—

“It is true, there is every probability of saving them alive, but think how utterly exhausted they will be after their long fasting and excitement; besides, only one may be alive, after all: let me entreat of you to keep as quiet as possible, especially when they are brought up. The danger then will be as great, if not greater than it is now; the very air may be fatal to them, the excitement of seeing their fellow-men again may be too much for them:

the mere passage to their homes may exhaust their little remaining strength. I speak with authority when I say that you cannot show your sympathy and kindness better than by dispersing quietly and at once, that no unusual stir may alarm the poor fellows ; and I may add that, near as we feel we are to them, there is still the work of some hours to be done, before we can penetrate to their place of durance."

"Well done, parson," cried a rough voice in the crowd. "Now, then, townspeople, you'd better go home to your suppers : heath-work won't suit you, I reckon."

The parson's reasoning gradually took effect, and by night few besides the pitmen were left ; most of them believing that the next morning would witness the crowning result. Only the privileged few knew how much nearer was the climax, and their intense excitement only showed itself in their more hurried, but stealthy movements.

Round the fire sat the Cravens and the ladies from the Manor ; for Bolton had not attempted to induce them to go home, believing all would be over in a very short time. John and Bolton came and went, whispering the latest intelligence from the workmen below, and the midnight hours drew nigh.

Once Bolton seated himself for a few moments at Constance's side.

"How calmly beautiful !" he said, pointing to the clear sky studded with stars ; "how many sorrows mightier than ours, it overlooks. When I was a child, I used to fancy the stars were the eyes of God watching us."

As he spoke the faint sound of the stable clock at the Manor, striking twelve, came over the heath. "That makes ninety-four hours since the poor wretches were buried," he said. "Ah ! there come the stretchers !"

Two rude couches of mattresses laid on hurdles were noiselessly placed close to the mouth of the shaft. Were they to be funeral biers or triumphal cars?

Shudderingly Constance watched the preparations: only the fear of appearing affected prevented her returning home at once; she had fancied she would like to see them delivered, but now she would have given much to be far away.

A little longer waiting. Again the engineer and the foreman went down; the latter came up again alone; he spoke whisperingly to Bolton, who in his turn roused the sleeping doctor, and a thrill of expectation agitated all around.

No words were spoken, but everyone grouped closer, and eight men silently took their places by the significant stretchers. In another moment suspense would be ended.

The rope on the wheel strained and creaked, and out of the yawning chasm the bucket rose heavily to the brink; there was a protracted delay while another burden made its slow ascent. In the breathless pause the old man's voice was heard, convulsively murmuring, "Oh Lord, have mercy!" while, scarcely visible in the waning moonlight, two bundles, entirely enveloped in blankets, were lifted out, placed carefully on the stretchers, and borne slowly through the long line of pitmen.

John Craven, with bare head, walked first, and recited the fortieth psalm:

"I waited patiently for the Lord, and he inclined unto me, and heard my calling. He brought me also out of the horrible pit, out of the mire and clay, and set my feet upon the rock, and ordered my goings," &c.

Constance's face was hidden by her shawl, when Mrs. Lance touched her and said,—

"They are both alive: we must go now; there is nothing more to be done."

Constance raised her tear-stained face, and encountered Bolton's eyes.

"Just what I thought," he said to himself: "she's a true woman, after all. I should have hated her if she'd pressed forward and watched it all."

The tramp of the bearers, and John Craven's solemn tones, died away, and then the pitmen gave vent to their pent-up feelings in a shout—or rather a series of shouts, first for the delivery, then for the engineer, then for their own exertions, and lastly for Mr. Bolton Lance, three times three.

"I've heard your voices before now, my friends," the young man cried, good-humouredly; "they sound much sweeter out here than they did in Dulton streets, I assure you!" A minute elapsed before they comprehended his allusion, and then there was a thundering roar of applause. "We didn't mean aught again you, Zur!" "You're the right zort of chap, Zur!" "Another cheer for the pluckiest chap in Darzet!" "Down with they electioneering rioters!" were a few of the remarks resulting from his.

The crowd pressed in front, and Constance, who stood behind Bolton, was completely hemmed in with him. Mrs. Lance had managed to escape with the Cravens. "Take tight hold of my arm," he said. "Now, my men, let us out, please! None of us have had overmuch bed-work lately!"

"All right, Zur," and they made way for him, wishing him every species of happiness, as he passed through the closely wedged mass.

"A pretty missus to you!" said one.

"Let 'un alone," cried another; "can't you see he's

all right there?" Personal remarks which, though highly amusing to the authors, were decidedly embarrassing to the parties concerned.

Constance, by way of appearing unconscious of their tendency, wondered where Mrs. Lance was, and Bolton, to show *his* perfect ease, made the original remark of the night being very fine.

It was uncommonly fine, though, and as they walked on through the calm solitude, earthly thoughts retreated from their hearts, and in silence they meditated on holier things. The stillness of the summer night spoke to them of Almighty goodness and protection; the silvery stars above, the scented air, the whispering leaves, impressed them forcibly, and no words were spoken till the dark gables of the Manor-house stood before them, rising in gray relief against the wooded hill beyond.

Mrs. Lance had not returned. She must have gone round by the village to see how the poor men bore the journey; so they turned back, past the long lawn with its drooping flower beds glistening with dew, to meet her.

As they entered the avenue, the first streak of dawn was gleaming in the east, the stars were setting one by one, and only the rim of the moon was visible above the horizon. The yellow branches of the laburnums, the spiral blossoms of the chestnut, the snowy petals of the thorns, and the odorous lilacs, were slowly assuming their daylight tints. Every bird was hushed in sleep; the breeze had dropped, only the low voice of the ever wakeful sea continued its everlasting praise.

There was witchery in the imperfect light, in the perfumed atmosphere, in the complete stillness; their tongues were unlocked, as still, arm in arm, the young people sauntered on together, talking of old times freely and

merrily ; fatigue and embarrassment had vanished ; they seemed to forget everything but the present, and felt neither surprise nor anxiety at Mrs. Lance's non-appearance.

"I agree with old Richards," said Bolton, getting on graver subjects as he gave vent to his inmost thoughts. "A grave in the sea is infinitely preferable to the dark earth. In all probability, mine will be there. I hope so ; I cannot bear the idea of crumbling away in a damp dreary vault."

"Damp !" she repeated ; "is not the water damper ? But seriously, think of that dreadful restlessness in the sea ; fancy being tossed about for ever : of being incessantly dashed from rock to rock, of encountering slimy monsters, of being exposed to storms and tempests, and of being cast up on some strange shore to lie and bleach for centuries, and then to be again tossed back ! I would rather be laid quietly at rest, near those I loved in life."

"Ah, but I like the idea of the continual motion : you have forgotten the beds of coral, the glittering gems, and sea flowers ! the brave hearts sailing above you, the glorious sun turning your liquid winding-sheet into burnished violet and green, the caves and islands untrodden by human foot ! The sea sings an eternal dirge for you ; it has no resurrectionists in its depths, there is no horrible crowding in its limitless crypt. Surely it is better even to bleach upon a foreign shore, than to lie unknown and unheeded in the place where you once lived supreme ! or to be shovelled up by the ignorant boors, who not even wondering who you were, will stupidly regard you as 'old bones,' and throw you away, to be picked up by silly Joe's successor !"

How strange it is that young people who have never

known sorrow, take pleasure in reading and talking of the dreariest subjects. What had these two in the first flush of life to do with death? Ah! can youth and pleasure last for ever? does the spring rose never lose her first sweet blush? does the glowing morn never fade into dim evening? The brighter the sun, the deeper the shade; the very force of the contrast heightens the attractions of both. Bolton added, laughingly,—

“We have got down among the dead men, rather unseasonably; let us change the subject; only recollect I have a grave to my taste, when you hear I am swung overboard some day.”

There was no answering smile as her eyes met his; she could not jest as he did on death, with this solemn light speaking to her of that dimmed hour when Azrael's wings shadow the glory of life from his subject's glazing sight; and her reproachful glance was mistaken for a tenderer personal feeling—at least that is the only excuse for his next movement. The trees arched overhead, even the stars closed their prying eyes as if they would wink at the liberty, and the sailor bending down, softly kissed the grave mouth that was in such dangerous proximity.

Poor Constance! none of her aunts' lectures had touched upon the correct conduct requisite in such a predicament as this. What ought she to do? If she followed the approved manner of heroines in books, she would instantly withdraw her hand from his arm, and on the wings of outraged modesty fly to implore the protection of the sleepy domestics; or else drawing herself to her full height, she must tragically exclaim, “Sir!” and by the mere expression of her offended eyes, send him abashed from her presence.

Meantime she did neither; for footsteps were heard approaching, and, almost immediately, Mrs. Lance,

escorted by the Cravens, came up. They *had* been to inquire after the old man and the lad, and brought good news of their condition. So with a foolish giggle, for which she heartily despised herself, Constance listened and questioned the new comers ; only showing, by her unusual volubility, that she was not exactly in a calm frame of mind.

Bolton kept her arm in his, and addressed her as they walked home, as if he had done nothing to forfeit her attention ; and so cool and commonplace were his observations that she began to question her own senses. Was she altogether mistaken ? could an overhanging branch have swept across her lips ? Hardly. She went to sleep still doubting, and innocently wondering whether any girl had ever been placed in the like trying circumstances. In her dreams, it was re-enacted to perplex her ; and so much are we the creatures of habit, that when the morning summons roused her from the pleasing repetition, she was almost cross at the interruption.





CHAPTER XIX.

IMPORTANT QUESTIONS.

THE glorious summer drew near its prime ; peace reigned triumphant at home and abroad ; London was rejoicing over returned heroes and coronation splendour, and “Bertie’s babies” still kept Nelly there, spell-bound ; at least, such was her excuse for delaying her return home—an excuse that caused Bolton to remark upon it as “a very new and interesting trait in Nelly’s character.” The country was exulting in purer and more satisfactory pleasures ; in meadows whose luxuriant flower-besprinkled store spoke of plenty for the winter, and in waving crops bending beneath their heavy treasure or rustling above the hedge, whispering of their importance. Between lanes garlanded with roses and honeysuckle, amidst plantations impervious to noonday sun and morning showers, along the beach strewn with noiseless sand, and in the sheltered gardens, Constance and her friends spent weeks of unclouded happiness ; Constance and Bolton generally ; for the squire and his wife were fully employed in arranging for the contemplated visit to Higmoor. Bolton had never presumed since that walk in the dawn, and Constance having almost forgotten the little contretemps, enjoyed his society without scruple. He was always happy, always good-

tempered, and his happiness invested everything said and done with enjoyment and zest. Consequently, when Nelly at last fixed on her return, and Mrs. Lance announced one morning that they would certainly have her at home that evening, the intelligence was not welcomed by the young couple as it should have been: their eyes meeting across the table betrayed the shadow that was over their thoughts. Constance blushed crimson, and instantly exclaimed,—

“Oh! I am so very pleased; how delightful it will be to have her here again!”

“Thank you,” said her hostess. “I must say your enthusiasm *slightly* hints of your present *ennui*—not very complimentary to us, is it, Bolton?”

After breakfast, as she stood idly at the open window, wishing she had not been so foolish as to look at Bolton, the latter joined her and said,—

“I suppose I need not invite you to go with me to the hayfield!”

“Why not? Why, I mean, did we not agree last night to go there and finish our book?”

“Yes; but I was not aware you were tired of ruralising when we made that agreement; I will absolve you from the engagement if it bores you.”

“You know I like—you know I always walk in the morning, I—” feeling herself becoming involved in her attempt to explain without compromising herself, she, womanlike, took refuge in anger; so, not saying another word, she tied on her hat, and stepped out on the terrace.

He followed her quickly, smiling, and merely remarking that he had brought the book, walked on silently by her side until they reached the hayfield. The grass had been turned that morning for the last time, and its

fragrance scented the air. She passed into the field, made herself a seat, and still without speaking, placed herself comfortably. He threw himself down by her side, and, waiting her pleasure, took up the hay around by handfuls, and threw it over her gown.

"Are you not going to read?" she asked, at last.

"Yes; but listen to that lark: do you see it—there?"

"Of course, I do."

"Sorry I spoke," he said, laughing; then added, soberly, "Constance, what is amiss—have I vexed you?"

The absurdity of her behaviour made her laugh.

"Never mind me," she said, though she avoided looking at him. "I am cross; I can't help being so sometimes: go on with the book, please."

He glanced sideways at her averted face as he opened the book and read for about ten minutes; then, as if his thoughts were on other things, he exclaimed,—

"I wonder if they will let me go to Higmoor in peace?"

The "they" represented the Admiralty, whose possible summons was used by him as a bugbear to keep his loving relations in constant dread of losing him; on this occasion there was no fear of his leave being curtailed, as he had been on foreign service nearly five years.

"Of course they will," said Constance, resolved not to betray her feelings a second time.

"Well," he continued, "whether I go or stay won't make any difference to anyone but myself, for Nelly will be here, you know."

He had an idea that his words annoyed her, though she made no sign, and, rejoicing in the thought, he read a little more; but very soon the book was thrown aside with his attempt to act a part averse to his nature, and he cried,—

"Do let us be jolly, Betsy Jane ; it is our last morning together. Oh ! I beg pardon, I forgot ; *that* is a cause of rejoicing for you."

He was the only person from whom she tolerated the once odious name : spoken by him it formed a link between them of those days of which now it was treason to speak ; the last remains of irritation vanished, therefore, as she exclaimed, turning a bright face towards him,—

"Surely you are not conceited enough to suppose your conversation is better than that book : give it to me, Sir !"

She held out her hand for it ; but instead of receiving it, Bolton placed his hand in hers.

"That's right," he said ; "frowning spoils the curve of your eyebrows : all these unkind words will sting your memory when I am drowned in the Bay of Biscay O !"

"You are too absurd," and she tried to disengage her fingers from his ; "do give me the book : I want to see how it ends."

"I shall not. Of course they all die or get married—serve them right, too. Do be serious, Con. I want to know if you will wear mourning when I am slung overboard ?"

"You are very wicked to jest on such a subject. Don't you know, only good people die young ? so you are safe for some years to come."

Without noticing what she said, he exclaimed,—

"I declare there's a fresh dimple."

She tried hard to appear dignified : why was he so unaccountably ridiculous ? but she could not help half smiling as she said,—

"I do not choose to be treated like a child : please give me the book, and allow me to have the use of my own fingers."

"Two on the right corner," he continued, still keeping her hand, "and one—no, actually two, on the other side, just where the colour comes; twenty years hence, there will be a hollow and a wrinkle there instead. I must say I'd no notion you'd grow up so pretty."

"Will you try and be sensible, or I shall go home?—or, if you must exercise your tongue, tell me about that wonderful battle."

"Well, but let me keep your hand: children always go hand in hand. I wonder they like to do so, for theirs are always hot and sticky; and recollect, if I had been killed in that battle, I should not be here now!"

"Really! but you forget—nought is never in danger."

"Constance!"

"If you will not be sensible, I really will leave you," and she attempted to rise.

"All right, my dear Betsy Jane—here goes. The morning dawned dark and cloudy—no, it couldn't dawn dark, could it—never mind, the morning dawned somehow, and showed us four line-of-battle ships ready to open their guns upon us. Will this style suit you?"

"Go on."

"I should like to measure your eyelashes."

"I shall——"

"No, stay still; I only just made a harmless observation:—When the first lieutenant sang out—everyone to whom I ever spoke before, honoured me by attending; but you have never once looked at me."

"Do go on."

"The first lieutenant said—"

"Oh! there's a little beastly flown in my eye; do take it out for me."

"Well, I hope you did," she said, slyly, as if supposing he was quoting the lieutenant.

"You are the most cruel, hard-hearted girl I ever knew;" and he screwed up his face as though enduring agony.

She took off her glove, and believing in his pain, probed for the imaginary insect; but notwithstanding his grimaces, nothing capable of causing them was visible.

"Thank you," he exclaimed with a grin; "my visual organ is quite well; I only wanted that tiresome glove out of the way: now I'll go on with my story;" and he imprisoned once more the uncovered hand.

"I shall leave you to recover," she said. "I really think you are mad." And she really did begin to wish the haymakers would appear, or that she could in some way escape from this embarrassing *tête-à-tête*.

"Oh! don't go," he cried, knowing it was impossible for her to rise while he held her hands. "Do you hate me?"

"Of course not," in a very snappish tone.

"Do you love me?"

Ah! here was the sudden solution to her late unclouded happiness; here was the key to the secret joy of her heart in his presence. She loved him, or why should she regret the interruption of Nelly's return? She loved him, or his image would not be ever floating through her bright day-dreams. She loved him, and the flowers and woods were bathed in the light reflected from her own heart.

She loved him, and the beating of the waves on the shore, the sighing of the summer wind, murmured her happiness all through the long bright day, all through the short sweet night. She was not ashamed of her love; she did not dream of denying it now; she knew he was bending towards her, eagerly awaiting her reply. She felt the grasp of his hand nervously tighten on hers, and turn-

ing her blushing face honestly towards him, she let him read his answer there.

The noonday sun rose higher and brighter, the larks sang glad choruses in the sleepy air ; the harebells nodded knowingly on their slender stalks, the sea murmured of everlasting bliss, and the young couple sat planning a future as fair as the scene around them ; transforming, by their happy fancy, the corner of the hayfield into a fairy bower, and building castles in the air of the most elaborate architecture.

After dinner, at which meal Constance made no end of mistakes, owing to the hints and significant looks by which Bolton evinced the buoyancy of his spirits, they adjourned to the garden, from whence they could see the carriage approaching from Dulton, where it had gone to meet Nelly ; they had not to look long before it came in sight.

“There’s some one with her,” cried Bolton ; “who can it be ? Some suitor she’s picked up in London, very likely. Hallo ! it—yes, it is the major !”

So it was, and Miss Nelly’s radiant face, as she stepped out of the carriage and ran towards the family group, proved he was not an unwelcome companion.

“I am very glad of it,” Bolton whispered to Constance, as her father released her from his embrace, and accompanied Mr. Lance to the dining-room ; “we can have our little business settled at once, now !”

The major accounted for his appearance very naturally.

Lady Charles was nervous at the thought of her sister travelling alone, and Miss Lance very kindly allowed him the privilege of protecting her.

“Miserable bachelors can be useful occasionally,” he added.

"My dear boy," cried the squire, cordially, "at any time, on any occasion, you are welcome here; doubly so now for bringing that little truant home."

"He wanted an excuse to see Miss Craven again," said Nelly, flashing her bright eyes at the major—a passage of arms seen by more than one.

The young lady having changed her travelling dress for a wonderful combination of muslin and lace, took her place at her father's side; and as she amused him with anecdotes of "little Charley's precocity," continually appealed for corroboration to the major in a saucy familiar manner, that, to those who were acquainted with Miss Lance's little manoeuvres, betokened an understanding between them rather above friendliness.

Bolton took the opportunity of handing a cup of tea to his stepmother, to say emphatically,—“Look out.”

She followed his eyes in Nelly's direction, and said in reply,—

“I thought so long ago, my dear blind boy.”

“Here's John Craven,” cried Nelly.

“So there is,” Bolton added, in a lower tone. “Now then for some sport!”

Mrs. Lance stopped him by remarking,—

“You are quite wild to-day, Bolton: I think I can guess something concerning Nelly's brother and Constance, can I not?”

“Marvellous combination of the Witch of Endor and the Wise Men of Gotham,” he whispered.

“You have *my* consent,” she added; “she is nearly good enough for you.”

“Nearly, mother! a thousand times too good!”

“Did you tell him, you naughty papa, that I was expected to-night?” asked Nelly, affectedly, as John Craven advanced towards them.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” said her father, rising to meet him; “he brings the subscription list for the pitmen’s Bibles. Well, John, we’ve got one young lady back again, and the major too, you see; you are just in time to welcome them.”

“Have you existed in Spireton all this time without once going to town?” asked Nelly, fascinatingly smiling at her quondam lover.

Neither by voice nor look did the parson betray the depth of woe Nelly supposed him to be suffering on her account. There could be no business where she was; so the subscription list had to be set aside, and John had to sit down and listen to her brilliant descriptions of London gaities. Mrs. Lance, indulgently looking at her step-daughter’s lively gestures, was suddenly attracted by the flashing of an exceedingly splendid ring on the young lady’s left hand; without reflecting, she exclaimed,—

“Oh, my dear! what a pretty ring! It is a new acquisition: pray let me see it.”

Constance had discovered it already, and had also made her private observations of the looks that passed between its wearer and the major. As Mrs. Lance spoke, an unmistakable flush rose to Nelly’s cheeks, and though she did not hesitate to slip it off her finger as required, her eyes glanced with annoyance at her step-mother; to whom she offered no explanation. Meantime, Major Vyvianne became deeply interested in the welfare of his host’s hay.

John Craven’s attention had become fixed on Nelly, as Mrs. Lance admired the glittering jewel, and she felt his grave, questioning look, when her step-mother exclaimed, still innocently,—

“And who gave you this?”

She felt also that Bolton’s gaze, full of amusement,

and Constance's, eagerly expectant, were upon her, and for once in her life she was at a loss. But the major came to the rescue ; he trod judiciously on old Ponto's tail, and that animal's howl of affliction successfully diverted the questioner's attention.

John Craven had seen and heard enough ; his mother and sisters had prophesied that Miss Lance would be Mrs. Vyvianne before the year was out, and the gossip which had stung him, even while he affected unconcern, now seemed confirmed. It was as well, he thought, as he acknowledged its foundation, that his lingering hopes should be altogether quenched ; but yet he could not sit in these gardens which had in bygone days witnessed their innocent happiness, and see unmoved that happiness another's.

He rose to say good-night. Nelly also rose.

"Let us go as far as the lodge with him," she said. But whatever hopes she had of showing him off as still her slave, were frustrated ; for when Bolton, Constance, and the major obeyed her summons, he placed himself by Constance's side, and resolutely kept there: though Nelly challenged him to hers with—

"This is quite like old times, is it not, John ?"

When he had gone, she laughingly accused Constance of taking her place in his affections.

"Confess," she exclaimed, "and we will call him back ; the major shall join your hands in orthodox style, with his paternal benediction : it would be a sweet scene in the moonlight."

"What nonsense you talk," cried Bolton, only half-relishing the joke. "Have a pipe, major ; I am allowed to smoke in my mother's and Constance's presence here."

"Rude boy," said Nelly, accepting the major's arm ; or, as Constance thought, taking possession of it. "Mr.

Lance spoils you : no wonder you could not stay in town ; such manners would not be tolerated there, you knew. But I am surprised that Constance will submit to be tyrannised over."

"Women should never scold, it puts the mouth out of shape," he retorted ; "nor does it come naturally from you, Nell. I'll pocket my pipe, if you'll walk up the avenue with me, and tell me of all your conquests in London."

"Their name is legion," said Major Vyvianne. "We shall all take cold down here : come, Miss Lance."

Unnoticed, as they walked on without a word for her, Constance, half shy of being left with Bolton, followed alone, while Bolton pretended to be busy with his pipe. He overtook her in a moment, the pipe in his pocket ; the tears were in her eyes as she raised her face, and he quickly guessed her feelings.

"You must be content with having all *my* love, old lady," he said, tenderly ; "you must not expect a man of your father's age to settle down quietly for life : besides, you did not intend remaining to console his declining years, did you ?"

All his life Bolton Lance had looked on the bright side, and by his cheerful, ingenuous reasoning had generally contrived to make others do the same. He had been the idol of the nursery, the favourite schoolfellow, the good fellow and sure friend of the mess, and his step-mother's darling. When Gabriel went wrong in his wild youth, his father's hopes had centered round his light-hearted sailor, who had never given him one moment's uneasiness. For five-and-twenty years life to him was unclouded ; his natural good bias preserved him from vice, and a strong current of unselfishness preserved him from egotism. Even his profession (pro-

verbially slow and partial) had smiled upon him. War had spared him to reap her honours unattended by her horrors, and yellow fever had passed lightly over his strong form, disarmed of its malignity. Handsome, hopeful, and loving, who could withstand him? Certainly not Constance. Of course she was wrong and selfish, and she entered the house quite satisfied at the prospect of a second mother, and quite happy; although his last words announced his intention of "making all taut," as he called asking the paternal consent to their engagement, before he slept that night.

"Come in, dear!" exclaimed Nelly, opening her room door, and preceding Constance into the apartment. "I'm neither tired nor sleepy; and do tell me seriously, is there anything between you and the Reverend Johnny?"

Constance shut the door, and exclaimed,—

"Yes, three-quarters of a mile; unless he is roosting in the avenue."

Nelly was pulling off her bracelets, and hardly smiled at the reply: her mind was evidently preoccupied. Still facing the dressing-table, so that Constance could not see her face, she asked,—

"Were you not surprised to see your papa with me?"

"Yes, very."

Constance was perfectly aware of what was coming; but she would not lessen her companion's difficulty by either a word or a look of assistance.

"How proud he is of you, dear," Nelly went on. "You don't know how much he talks about you: isn't he ridiculously young to have a grown-up daughter? He was so much admired in London, no one would believe in your existence."

Constance gave a little laugh, no other comment.

"Papa likes him immensely, don't you think so, dear?"

Nelly was actually nervous; she had taken off all her trinkets except the brilliant ring, and now seating herself sideways to Constance, she kept her eyes on her hand, the finger of which became chafed and red as the ring was twisted round and round, as if for inspiration.

"Mr. Lance is so kind to everyone," was Constance's reply.

"Ah! and what a favourite you are with him, dear—with them all, in fact," she went on rapidly, with this good idea to work upon. "I am sure papa and Mr. Lance like you better than me. I am so glad, because, you see, if I ever marry, you could——"

"But, Nelly, I have my own father to take care of."

"Oh! yes, dear, to be sure. Still, *he* might marry; he is so very young yet: in fact, dear," and she raised her eyes to her companion's, "I really believe he is thinking of doing so."

If Nelly was acting now, she was playing her part skillfully; and Constance, looking on the matter, since Bolton had talked it over, in a more congenial light, could not go on canvassing as probable what she felt to be positive. After all, Nelly was much preferable to a stranger; and what right had she herself to be vexed at her father's having chosen a wife without consulting her, when she had made her choice without consulting him? With these thoughts, she exclaimed naturally and kindly,—

"Tell me at once: it is to some one whom I know very well, is it not?"

"Oh! I am so glad you have guessed! Yes, indeed, dear, it is I! You are not sorry, are you, dear? You are the first person I have told!"

She had risen, and stood before her, awaiting her re-

ply. Constance rose at once, and kissed her, murmuring something about her kindness in other days. And Nelly went back to her chair quite satisfied, and gave a description of the commencement of the courtship, &c.; to which Constance listened, half-amused and half-indignant at her father's sweet speeches being retailed as John Craven's, and half a score of other admirers', had been.

"However," she continued, "perhaps it is hardly correct to talk to you about him. I'll tell you what I think of having for my trousseau: Annie and I amused ourselves with making a list one wet afternoon. But, dear, you need not call me mamma: I shall always be Nelly to you. I wonder how they get on?"

"Who?"

"The gentlemen."

"I made him promise to speak to papa to-night. You see it is so awkward for me, everyone noticing my ring."

Constance wondered, too—recollecting another explanation to be made that night—and smiled to herself as she pictured Mr. Lance's perplexity.

"Have you seen much of Roger?" Nelly asked next. "I fancied he was near the lodge as we entered the avenue. Whatever will he think?"

"The sooner he knows the better. What can it matter to him?"

When Constance was shut in her own chamber, and able to think over the events of the day, a droll fear lest there should lurk in some obscure canon of the Church a prohibition against the proposed intermarriages, prevented graver images. She took her Church Service, and diligently read, "whom a man may, and may not marry," and then each of the articles, until she became completely bewildered and involved in ecclesiastical problems. As she was shutting the book, Bolton's step

sounded in the corridor, and his customary cheery "Good-night, mother," at Mrs. Lance's door as he passed to his room, broke in pleasantly upon her studies, and seemed to foretell by its lightness that all was, and would be well.

While the young ladies were talking up stairs, Mr. Lance, his son and the major smoked in silence on the terrace; two out of the three wishing each other at Jericho, and wondering how to get the squire by himself.

Mr. Lance unconsciously decided by pushing open his study window; and walking in, he called to Bolton to give him a light.

Bolton followed, and closed the window behind him, lighted the table lamp, pulled the easy chair forward, and astonished his father by requesting him to sit down for five minutes' serious conversation.

"Ah!" cried Mr. Lance, seating himself as he was bid, and proceeding to open a fresh box of cigars. "Anything wrong with the tobacco? try bird's-eye, my boy, or else take to these things."

"Nothing about tobacco, father; it's concerning her—I mean it's—— You like Constance, Sir, do you not?"

"Like Constance!" was the absent rejoinder, as he carefully weighed two cheroots on his fingers. "Like Constance!—I am sure these are two different sorts!"

"If you will attend to me for one moment."

Mr. Lance dropped the cigars, and, struck by his son's serious tone, exclaimed,—

"My dear boy, I beg your pardon. Well, what is it, something amiss with Constance, did you say? Stay, I'll call Vyvianne. I'll——"

"No, no, Sir; sit still, I only wish to tell you that I—that is, we——"

The major's figure passing the window stopped him : he drew a chair in front of the squire's, sat down horse-back fashion, and wishing himself on the deck of a storm-tossed vessel, or in any other noisy predicament, wherein his own voice would not be so alarmingly distinct, began again,—

“ Confound the major ! there he is again.”

“ What ? ”

“ Oh, nothing, father ; but I may as well speak out at once : the fact is, I and Constance—at least Constance and I—though it is all the same, of course, have made up our minds ; at least we shall when—if you have no objection. Oh ! I'm a bigger ass than Gabriel ! My dear father, I should like to marry Constance, and she has promised to be my wife.”

“ God bless me ! My dear boy ! to be sure ; it's what we all come to. But really ! By George ! Does your mother know ? Why, you were in jackets only the other day ! How old are you, my son ? ”

“ Twenty-six,” said Bolton, whose self-possession rapidly returned when his father lost his ; “ at least, I am rising twenty-six.”

“ Impossible ! ” cried his father, rubbing his head vaguely, and regarding him as though he suspected him of being the victim of strong mental delusion. “ Impossible ! ”

“ A fact,” said Bolton.

Mr. Lance remained mutely gazing at him for some seconds, then he cried,—

“ I can't believe it : reach me the Bible : it *cannot* be ! ”

Bolton placed the large old volume before him, and the squire, drawing his chair close to the table, opened it. Passing over faded columns of entries of bygone generations' births and deaths, he put his finger silently

on the notice of his own marriage, and the succeeding string of his children's births ; the last was that of—

“Bolton, born May 24th, 1794.”

He sighed as he looked on the faint running characters, in different writing to the rest.

“How well I recollect when this was written,” he said.

Your mother insisted on doing it herself ; she wished me to see how strong and well she was getting. Hannah was there too,” he continued more to himself ; “she had the baby in her arms. Bless me ! is it six-and-twenty years ago ? It seems like the other day !”

Without speaking, the son looked over his father's shoulder, and pictured the scene. Mr. Lance was not in the habit of alluding to the past, and had never before mentioned his dead wife to his children. He only knew his mother's painted image as she was represented in the large picture in the hall, a young girl in bridal dress, beaming a softer, sweeter expression than Nelly's, and yet most like her of all the children. Glancing on her hand-writing, he forgot all but the thoughts it aroused ; and Mr. Lance's finger passed on to the only other entry.

“Helen, wife of the above Gabriel Lance Lance, died September 13th, 1794, aged twenty-seven ;” then he closed the Bible, and turning to his son, said,—

“That was a love match, my boy ; may yours be as happy and last longer ! Now good-night, and God bless you ; let's have no particulars till to-morrow. I'd rather be alone.”

Bolton's heart was too full for words ; he shook the offered hand, and respectfully raised it to his lips : but, before he had left the room, the squire recalled him.

“I have forgotten,” he said smiling ; “there's Vyvianne, you know ; he'll expect to be consulted, of course. I can't promise anything, you see, till I hear his opinion.”

"Shall I call him? I'd rather have it all over and settled at once."

As he spoke, the major, whose patience and cigars had both run out, pushed the window open and exclaimed,—

"I don't wish to interrupt, but I particularly want a few words with the squire."

"All right," cried Bolton, his nervousness returning as both the arbiters of his fate stood before him, "we can finish our business to-morrow, father;" and off he went, leaving his father a prey to the conviction that he should get no sleep that night.

"We can talk as we walk, if you like," said Major Vyvianne, rightly judging that in the fresh air, and with a good cigar, Mr. Lance would be much easier to manage than if brought to bay in his study.

Meekly resigning himself, the squire did as he was bidden. The surprise and bewilderment occasioned by his son's confession, was doubled as his companion calmly announced that Miss Helen had done him the honour of accepting his hand—dependent on her father's consent.

He pushed his hat as far off as was consistent with safety, and standing still, opened his eyes wide with astonishment on vacancy. Meanwhile the major, struck with the ludicrous resemblance between him and Gabriel, smiled to himself in silence; until, finding Mr. Lance was not likely to make any comment of his own, he briefly detailed his plans and intentions respecting his future wife, and before Mr. Lance had half digested the first astounding revelation, had thanked him for his cordial consent, and assured him that Helen should never regret the trust she reposed in him.

On this the squire faintly articulated,—

"Impossible!" thereby disagreeably arresting the major's profuse declarations of regard.

"Impossible?" the latter repeated. "How so, Sir?"

"It's against the rubric; it's against the canons and the articles, and everything, my dear boy;" and the squire set off with rapid strides, adding at intervals, "you'd be your nephew's grandfather, she'd be her brother's mother, he'd be his children's cousin."

It was the major's turn to display utter bewilderment now, so much so that for some moments he was absorbed in dreadful doubts as to the squire's sobriety, and could only follow him, without seeking for an explanation.

At last Mr. Lance again stopped short, and cried apologetically, "Bless me, I forget—you know nothing about your daughter and my son—why, you must be thinking me mad, eh?"

The major only looked wonderingly.

"Bolton and Constance," continued Mr. Lance. "He's just told me they are engaged—now, what's to be done?"

"'Pon my soul!" cried Major Vyvianne, whose thoughts had lately been so entirely engrossed with himself, that he never contemplated matrimony in connexion with anyone else; "'pon my soul! you astonish me!"

"Ah! I never was more astonished in my life; but really he put it to me so sensibly, that really, Vyvianne, I don't see why he should not think of marrying as well as others;" and forgetting the obstacles which had a moment before appeared insurmountable, he linked his arm in his friend's, and became quite eloquent in pleading his son's cause.

The major meantime ran over rapidly in his mind the fors and againsts, and the former carried the day. Bolton

was, as his father said, a rising man ; Constance might go further and fare worse, and if she married, he and Nelly would be left at liberty : as soon, therefore, as Mr. Lance paused, he exclaimed,—

“ I assure you, I am highly gratified with Constance’s choice : Bolton’s worth is unquestionable ; but you said something about insuperable objections, I think ? ”

“ That’s it ! ” and the squire, recalled to his former idea, explained his fears concerning the proposed inter-marriages. Major Vyvianne had a keen sense of the ridiculous—almost the only trait in his character inherited intact by his child—and Mr. Lance’s forlorn expression as the remembrance returned, and he prophesied no end of misery to unborn generations if such cross unions took place, made him laugh so heartily that his host was half disposed to be offended.

“ Ten thousand pardons ! ” cried the major ; “ but you look so serious. I assure you, it is all right ; there is no law, either human or divine, than we can break in this instance. No fear of Helen’s being cited before the Ecclesiastical Commissioners : it is certainly a little bewildering, though, at first sight ; for, in course of time, Helen may become her grandchildren’s aunt.”

His mirth quieted his host’s qualms ; Mr. Lance relighted his cigar, which happening to be a remarkably good one, soothed his perturbed spirits, and the major carried the conference entirely to his own wishes ; the squire only making a little show of paternal authority by saying as he bade him good-night,—

“ Well, my dear fellow, remember I shall not give an answer till to-morrow. I must sleep upon it, as they say.”

“ I leave my cause in safe keeping,” said the major ; adding mentally, “ Nelly and I are more than a match for you and your wife.”



CHAPTER XX.

THE TWO RINGS.

MAJOR VYVIANNE was on the watch next morning for his daughter. He called her into his room as she passed along the corridor, and presented her with a little ring of pearls set on black enamel.

“Here, my darling,” he exclaimed. “I wore this when your mother died; her hair is at the back. I have got it altered to fit you, fancying you might like it.”

The tiny plait of fair hair, all that remained of those abundant tresses behind which Constance had playfully hidden in her unconscious babyhood, spoke powerfully to the girl’s heart; the tears came to her eyes, and she could not find words to express her appreciation of her father’s thoughtful gift. He, mistaking her silence, added,—

“That style is the prevailing fashion; I assure you, it can be worn at any time—I particularly inquired.”

“I was not thinking of that, papa: indeed you could not give me anything that I should value as much as this; but it recalls mamma so plainly. I had forgotten how pretty her hair was—so long and silky. I can’t tell you how much obliged I am, dear papa. I shall always wear it, for the sake of you both.”

He was not weak enough to be sentimental in private, and her tearful caress smote him rather disagreeably.

"Well, well!" he said, "I am glad you like it: now let us go down to breakfast."

"I want to tell you," she said, still standing before him, and blushing and stammering as she spoke, "that Nelly has told me; and I hope you will be very happy, dear papa."

"Oh, ah!" he replied, half embarrassed, and half glad to get over the explanation. "I felt sure you would be pleased; in fact—ah! I was certain Miss Lance would be a pleasanter companion for you than a stranger. I wish you to understand that my marriage will make no difference with regard to your little portion."

"Oh, papa! don't talk of that; I know you have acted most kindly and liberally towards me;" and in her impulsive affection she would have told him of her aunt's kindness to her, and would have offered to make that do for all her wants; but he interrupted her with,—

"I heard something about *you* last night; you are a lucky girl; Bolton is sure to get on; the Duke of Clarence publicly commended him the other day. But there must be nothing more than an engagement at present; marriage would ruin his professional prospects."

"But he is not dependent on his pay, papa?"

"No, but you can't understand these matters; you would not like, in after years, to hear him say you had prevented him becoming famous. You are both young enough to wait; and to tell you the truth—only, of course, I speak in confidence—Gabriel's constitution is completely shattered: a hundred to one against his outliving his father, and then, you know, Bolton's position will be considerably better."

"Oh, don't let us think of that," she said, hastily.

He laughed sarcastically, saying,—

“Arcadian notions are out of fashion, my dear child, and your features are not sufficiently regular for you to adopt a sanctimonious expression ; pray don’t be Methodistical in your notions.”

The reason of his determination against his daughter’s immediate marriage was this : It would inconvenience him for the next year or two to give Constance a dower suitable to his pride and position. Nelly’s fortune—which she inherited from her mother—was considerable, and he would not be behindhand in placing her in a position equal to that in her father’s house. And as Bolton was at present situated, it was unlikely that his father would permit him to encumber himself with a penniless wife.

“I must give Helen a hint,” he thought, as he followed his daughter down stairs ; “we must be careful, only for the young man’s sake. When he has his ship, and Mr. Lance gets over the extra expenses of settling Gabriel and Helen, he won’t look so sharp after Constance’s allowance from me.”

There was no end to the conferences held in the study that morning. The major and Nelly held theirs with the squire and his wife first. Then Bolton took his sister’s place, and manfully faced both fathers ; Nelly employing the interim in talking to Constance, who, “she was sure, would not encourage that impetuous boy to ruin his prospects by an early marriage.”

“It is not very likely,” Constance observed, rather sharply, “that I should countenance any proceeding hurtful to his well-being. I’m not a love-sick school-girl.”

Mr. Lance sat in his study, much as though he was going through his weekly accounts with his bailiff, or

judging some petty criminal in his magisterial capacity; both of which matters were direful eras in his easy life.

To be sure he had his wife's countenance in the present affairs; but she was sparing of her opinion, and would not interfere.

"My dear Hannah!" he said, appealingly, when Bolton begged him to consent to his speedy marriage, and the major assured him that such a step would be highly imprudent and detrimental: "My dear Hannah, you must come to my rescue. Here's Vyvianne wants his wife directly, and I've promised he shall have her; and here's Bolton declaring himself quite an old bachelor, with no time to lose. Really, don't you think they might all get it over at the same time? But then, Constance is very young, and—oh! dear, what a pity one cannot please all parties."

"The fact is," said the major, "Constance ought to have more experience of life to confirm her present inclination: not that I wish anything to weaken her highly creditable taste, or that I think she is likely to change under any circumstances; but she is—as the squire observes—very young to begin the cares of life. I, as her natural guardian, am bound to study her interests, and my idea is that she should have time for consideration. Let, then, two years elapse; that is all I ask, for your sake, almost as much as hers."

"Very fair, very fair," cried the squire.

Bolton made an impatient gesture, but the major continued,—

"Of course Bolton thinks two years an eternity, but I have seen enough of early marriages, and generally they are the worst steps young men can take: the bar to all other steps, most frequently. It is impossible for a man

to devote himself to his profession so entirely as he ought to do, if he wishes to get on, when he has other things to occupy his thoughts ; we all know that unless we pursue fortune with our wits clear and our hands free, we cannot catch her. In the navy, a married subordinate is a thousand times worse than in the army. A wife is not allowed on board ship ; and think of the wretchedness of leaving a pretty young woman in dirty lodgings in a seaport town."

"As *my* wife," cried Bolton, "she would not be left in dirty lodgings in a seaport, but would have a right to comfortable shelter under my father's roof. In Nelly's absence she would be a comfort to him and my mother, and when I am on leave we could be together, without the innumerable awkwardnesses attending engaged couples."

"Very fair, very fair," said the squire again. "It is a most difficult case, Hannah, my dear."

Mrs. Lance interposed with her calm, clear voice.

"Much as I should like," she said, "to have a right to consider Constance as my dear daughter, still I agree with Major Vyvianne, not only in considering it would be wrong to permit her to hurry into a life-long union without proper time for deliberation, but also that, as you have entered upon a profession, you are bound to follow it diligently."

"You all talk," said Bolton, "as if I wanted to give up my profession ; on the contrary, a wife would make me more ambitious to succeed in it. Why, I should go into action with twice the pluck to think I might acquire new laurels with which to decorate my wife."

"His wife !" murmured the squire ; "was ever anything so ridiculous ?"

They all laughed, Bolton as heartily as anyone. The next moment he said, seriously,—

"It's no laughing matter to me. Come, father! you were a family man at my age; so were you, Vyvianne: let me have my wife. I may get knocked on the head on my next cruise."

"You have started another objection," said the major. "So you would purchase a few months' pleasure at the risk of life-long sorrow to your wife."

"That is not like you," added his step-mother. "You would not die happier, would you, for remembering you had made her a desolate widow? besides, she might not be the sole sufferer."

"I did not think of that," he said, naïvely, with a sudden flush; "but still," and he turned to the major, "I hate long engagements: they wear one's life out. If my father consents to our immediate marriage, will you?"

"No," was the decided answer. "In justice to Constance I will not."

"And," said Mrs. Lance, grieved that she must go against her darling's wishes, "you know whenever you get leave you can come straight home. Constance will, I hope, take Nelly's place. Major Vyvianne, you will let us make that exchange, I hope?"

"You are very good. My aunts said something about hoping she would spend the winter with them; but, no doubt, they will relinquish her to you."

Bolton sat cogitating every possible means of gaining his wish. At length he said,—

"Constance may object to wait so long?"

"If so," said her father, "she is not worth anything. I will fetch her if you like, and we will hear her opinion."

"No tampering beforehand," cried Bolton; "let me go for her."

The major gravely interposed.

"We have had no conversation on the subject"—he knew his daughter would not contradict any assertion of his,—“I shall certainly not bias her unfairly.”

“Ah,” said the squire when the major had gone, “you see, my son, if you had been in the Church, a wife would be a necessary, and of the greatest use.”

“I’ll take orders,” he cried. “No, I won’t even for her: that would be wicked.”

“Bless me!” cried his father, “did you ever see or hear such impetuosity, Hannah!”

“He is acting like a spoilt schoolboy!” she exclaimed. “Surely Bolton, if you can’t see the propriety of giving Constance time to know her own mind, you might consider your sister and Major Vyvianne. It would be rather awkward, to say the least, for a father and daughter to marry at the same——”

“That’s it!” he interrupted. “That’s why Vyvianne holds back. It’s the most nefarious, selfish plot that——”

“Nonsense!” Mr. Lance interposed. “Listen, my son. I did not like to say this before Vyvianne—in fact, I have only just thought of it; but really I should find it rather inconvenient to increase your allowance as much as you would require just yet. You see, there’s Gabriel’s establishment, and Nelly’s trousseau and portion to pay down; and then Higmoor will cost something heavy in refurnishing. I don’t wish you to begin life shabbily, so you had better wait.”

Here the major entered with his daughter.

“I have brought her to speak for herself,” he said, motioning to her to be seated. “I have explained matters briefly to her, but have not fettered her.”

“Let me speak first,” cried Bolton.

“No!” Constance exclaimed, her crimsoning face

alone betraying her emotion. "I have only to say that I would prefer remaining as I am, until I am twenty-one. That will be two years hence. Papa says that is all that is required."

She avoided meeting her lover's eyes, and he did not see how hers filled with tears as he exclaimed, ironically,—

"I am excessively obliged to you."

"So you ought to be," said Mr. Lance; the sight of the tears enlisting all his sympathies in her favour, and against the cause of them. "So you ought to be: it is not every young woman of her attractions who would waste her time over you. Never mind, my child," he added, turning to her; "perhaps we may manage it after all."

She was vexed that they all persisted in supposing she was as eager to be married as her lover, and, looking now straight at him, she said,—

"I do not wish to be married, but it is on your account. Perhaps you are afraid your regard will not last so long as two years."

"I am not afraid," he cried, indignantly, "*of my regard*, as you say, cooling, but of yours."

"In that case, it will be better to discover that before than after marriage."

"Well done, Con," laughed her father; "she has the best of the argument, Bolton. My dear fellow, I married in haste and re—and found I had been only selfish where I meant to be kind."

"Perhaps you prefer she should be free entirely?" retorted Bolton, still indignantly.

"That is for you and Constance to determine."

"There! there!" cried the squire rising, hastily, "let us have no more of this, making the poor child cry. Serve him right to throw him over, Constance. Now,

Bolton, I have to look after those black-faced lambs, and to hear how many loads were carried yesterday ; let me know what is to be, without more delay."

The young man turned with a brighter face to Constance, and held out his hand.

"I submit to adverse winds," he said. "Will you wait for me if I wait for you?"

Laughingly, they shook hands, and Mr. Lance, following their example, congratulated his wife and the major with the like hand salutes : he was about to leave the room, when recollecting himself, he came back to say,—

"We'll have a proper understanding : just give me my desk, Bolton. Look here!" and, unlocking it, he took from it an old-fashioned ring-case containing a hoop of glittering brilliants. "See," he added, "every eldest son in our family for generations past has been betrothed with this. Gabriel was differently circumstanced ; he was the solitary exception. This ring made me happy—twice. I should like one of my sons to use it : we will reverse the proper order for once ; you, Bolton, shall give it to Constance, and return it to me when you replace it on her finger by the wedding-ring. Constance ! every woman who has worn this has been faithful and honoured : *you* will not be otherwise, I believe and trust. God bless you both, my children !"

"Gracious me !" cried Mrs. Lance, as Bolton was about to place the ring beside that containing Mrs. Vyvianne's hair ; "remove that mourning-ring first : at least, put them on different hands !"

"Superstitious old lady !" said Bolton, as he obeyed her by placing the diamonds on Constance's left and the pearls on her right hand. "Now, is that right ? What a swell you are, Constance ! Thank you, father ; we mean to be a second edition of Darby and Joan." The

momentary clouds having passed from his brow, complete harmony reigned, and nothing more was said on the subject of a speedy marriage.

Constance dutifully went to announce her engagement to her Aunt and Uncle Gittens.

"Hum!" was Hester Jane's greeting, "so I hear you are all bent on making fools of yourselves at the Manor. I suppose Mr. Gabriel's marriage was 'contiguous,' and set you all off. Well, your father's got his match this time, I fancy—that's a comfort. He'll find Miss Helen rather different to Louisa; he'd better try to snub *her*! and I reckon he'll have to keep his children to himself—I hope he'll have a precious lot. But I say, wait till they *are* married; for it wouldn't surprise me if a Hottentot or a Hesquimokes turned up one of these fine days and forbid the banses. I wouldn't trust none of 'em in foreign parts; he always had a eye for beauty, and, you know, Venus was a Hottentot!"

"Constance was too much used to Mrs. Gittens to resent her free speaking.

"You seem to know all the news," she only said.

"Why, our Ann's aunt is own cousin to your Betty housemaid; and though I never let servants think I listen to their stories—a set of hignorant numsculls, thinking only of their suppers and their sweethearts—yet I couldn't help hearing what they said. Is it true that you are to have a new mother as soon as possible, and that you are to wait till Mr. Bolton is a drum-major, or a sea hadmiral, or something?"

"Yes, quite true; but papa will be married at Higmoor, not here!"

"No, I should think not, indeed, after his last exploit in that way. Our Roger's in a fine way, I can tell you, and them Framptons are not best pleased with you; they

say, if you are good enough to marry a Lance, so is Roger. I just told 'em plainly that Roger and you is as different as chalk and cheese. A parcel of ninnies! but I think Farmer Frampton is beginning to think he's wasted his money over that idle 'vagabone,' Roger."

"What is Roger doing now?"

"Oh, idling about: and threatening to go to Ameriky: he says them savages would appreciate a gentleman like him, without reckoning up mouldy ancestors before they have anything to do with him. Say I, 'Let him go to the *antipodes* if he likes; he'll find his mistakes when he's getting roasted and eat up.' Your uncle is going to give 'em a touch up against backbiting next Sunday!"

"Where is uncle? I have some of mamma's hair to show him!"

"Oh, my! what a pretty ring. And that's the diamond, is it? Well, them that lives longest sees most; but I said to Ann when she told me the squire had given the old ring to his youngest instead of his eldest son, I said to Ann, 'Ann,' says I, 'if there's anything in anything, there's sure to be a something.' Dear me! to think that these lovely gems are thrown away amongst those poor heathens! I wonder God Almighty did not give us these and them poor creatures coals—they'd have thought a deal more of a fine lump of coal dangling to their poor nose-ends, I dare say. Oh! I should like those Framptons to see it!"

"Is uncle in?"

"No, he's gone to Dulton."

With many winks and nods, Mrs. Gittens crossed the little hall, and cautiously opened the kitchen door; where, having satisfied herself that Ann was busily employed in the inner scullery, she as cautiously returned to the parlour, and continued in a whisper,—

"The fact is, he's gone after making his will, and he's left the sugar-basin and cream-jug back to you : for it is but fair, we think, and in your position a bit of extra plate is sure to come in useful."

"How very kind and thoughtful ! I hope it will be very long before I receive them."

"Ah ! well, that's as it happens ; of course if John goes first, I should have the use of 'em for my life ; but you know *I* shan't hurt 'em : our Ann thinks I keep 'em with my Sunday bonnet ; but I wouldn't trust anyone, so I let her think so ;" and with more nods and winks, Mrs. Gittens resumed her natural voice.

"Now look at mamma's hair," said Constance ; "are they not two beautiful presents to have in one day?"

Mrs. Gittens took it from her.

"Ah ! there is her hair, sure enough," she said. "Poor thing ! but she was rather too sweet, to my taste ; however, she's dead and gone. But did you say you got this and that, both together?"

"Both in one day."

Her aunt solemnly shook her head.

"I pity you," she cried. "Mark my words ! I never heard tell of a 'funeral' ring and a contract ring ever going together without sorrow ; however, what will be, will be."

Constance tried to conceal her laughter at the doleful countenance and tones in which Mrs. Gittens apostrophised the little rings in her hands : but the good lady discovered her smiling face, and her wrath instantly rose.

"It's very well !" she cried, "for you to make game of me, as you owe everything to—poor puny thing as you were, as might have fallen into the fire, or overeaten yourself, or taken a deathless complaint twenty times a day, if I hadn't done my duty like a hen after her chick !"

"Indeed, dear aunt," Constance interrupted, "I never can forget all your kindness ; I was only smiling because Mrs. Lance also seemed to think my sudden acquisitions unfortunate."

"Did she?" cried her aunt, thoroughly appeased. "Ay, there now ! But never mind, my dear ; let's hope nothing 'll come of it this time."

As Constance crossed the fields on her return to the Manor, she met her Cousin Roger, who was sitting on a stile, sucking the end of a buck-handled whip. He kept his seat even when she was close to him, and vouchsafed her no other salutation than,—

"Now, Miss ! let's hear what's all this about your pa getting married. He's given you the slip, has he? I expected you'd soon have your nose put out of joint."

"Will you please to get down, and allow me to pass?"

"Oh!" he continued, still sitting dangling his legs, "so you're too fine to notice your poor ma's relations ! I'd like to know what you'd have done without them when your pa turned you off."

"I'm only ashamed of one of my dear mother's relations," she exclaimed,—“yourself ! and as you seem to have nothing to say to lessen my dislike to you, we had better pass on.”

"No, not yet : don't think to annoy me with that stage madam manner : answer my question, and I'll make way for you. Is it true that Helen Lance is going to marry your father?"

His voice deepened as he spoke, and there was an expression of determination in his face that would stand no trifling with. The stile was the only opening in the thick high hedge, and the little pathway on either side was bordered by high growing wheat ; she must either retrace her steps and go round by the road or answer his

question, and so prevail upon him to vacate his barrier position; she chose to do the latter, having no desire to spare his feelings, so she said,—

“Of course it is true; and they will be married in the autumn, in Yorkshire; it is a very suitable match, and we are all very pleased. Now please to come down.”

“Vixen!” he cried, clutching her arm and glaring at her, “and d—d fool, too! Don’t you see you stand in your own light by letting her marry? Come,” he added, seeing that his violence only made her more haughty and disdainful: “come, make friends, and I’ll put you up to something that will soon stop their fun. Look here!”

He drew out from his breast a letter, of which the writing was Helen Lance’s; but Constance did not even look at it.

“Make friends with you!” she said, fearlessly, her anger raised by his griping hold on her arm: “you are the greatest coward living, or you would not insult a defenceless woman in this way. I will tell you why I am ashamed of you; because you have suffered your hard-working parents to deprive themselves of hard-earned money to procure extravagances for you; because you have rewarded them by wasting your energies, time, and youth: because you have squandered sums that would have made their old age comfortable, thanklessly; and because you are a selfish, exacting bully!”

“Well done!” he cried, grinding his teeth with rage. “I should think King’s Rest is situated in Billingsgate, to judge from your language. You’d better mind, Miss! and not come the parson over me. Don’t call yourself a defenceless woman while you have the use of your tongue, my dear. Coward and bully as I am, I scorn to punish your snarling and yelping. I don’t want more

of your company than I can help, I assure you ; promise me to deliver a message from me to Helen Lance *privately*, and I will let you go."

"Thank you ! but you need not employ a messenger : look behind ; here she is to receive it herself."

He started and looked back, and there, through the waving corn that hid all but their heads and shoulders, Nelly and the major were advancing ; the young lady walking first, and plucking at the ears of wheat as she came merrily along. She saw the figures at the stile, and her cheeks were bright as the poppies among the corn as she came up. Constance jumped over, and Roger followed.

The major took no notice of his nephew, but told his daughter she need not have loitered on her way, as luncheon was ready and waiting.

Roger had offered no civility to anyone but Nelly : he put out his hand to her, and she had placed hers in it ; he held it tight for an instant, while his glowing eyes went from her ring to her face with a meaning look that stopped the careless words on her lips. Constance saw the red mark his pressure had made on the ungloved hand, but the major only thought of his presumption in shaking hands at all.

The latter motioned to the ladies to proceed, and, pointing in the opposite direction, he exclaimed to the young man,—“That is *your* way, Sir ; we are in haste.”

Roger vaulted over the stile, and vanished ; while the major continued speaking in so loud a tone that if he was anywhere within ear-shot he must hear.

“There was no occasion for you to shake hands, Helen : his parents are respectable in their way, but he is a worthless fellow ; so never do violence to your feelings through mistaken kindness to me.”

Nelly spoke again, thinking Roger must be far away by this time.

"To tell you the truth, he made a goose of himself at the election ; he fancied we were civil to him for his own sake. I never like to be otherwise than polite, and if he *will* be stupid, I cannot help it, can I ?"

Her eyes, with their practised softness, looked into the major's ; he finished the sentence for her.

"So you were so anxious to win votes that you did not think you were winning a heart at the same time ! Constance, tell me, didn't the young fool singe his wings at the shrine of this fair lady, eh ?"

Constance did not particularly relish being appealed to, to corroborate a statement not *exactly* correct ; luckily her father went on without waiting for her reply.

"Red-haired people are always presumptuous ; no doubt he believed his attractions equivalent to his want of birth : ah ! ah !"

"Perhaps," laughed Nelly ; "but I can't help pitying his folly, and so I am ten times more civil to him."

"Dangerous policy !" and the major's tone changed from banter to serious ; thereby causing Miss Nelly to feel rather uncomfortably conscious that he would not be such an acquiescent adorer as poor Johnny Craven had been.

This consciousness, and the fear of the result if he ever became aware of the true state of affairs concerning Roger Frampton, made her desirous to leave this dangerous neighbourhood, and hurry on their departure for Yorkshire. No such inward dread was, however, apparent in her manner, as, with great gusto, she recounted the scene in chapel when Lord Charles was there, and gave a grotesque description of Roger's toilette on that memorable occasion.

Meanwhile, crouching behind the hedge, far down in the dry ditch, lurked the unhappy object of her ridicule. He followed their slow footsteps, drinking in every word and light laugh : a draught that poisoned as it coursed through his veins.

Once the footsteps stopped, the merry words ceased, close to him ; his heart stood still. Had they seen the glitter of his eyes through the leafy hedge ? No, it was only that Nelly was attracted by some wild roses : her attempt to gather them shook the leaves around him, and, hardly daring to breathe, he crouched yet further down among the brambles.

"I cannot break the thing," her voice said just above him. "Haven't you got a knife, Con ?"

The eaves-dropper winced at the familiar question.

"No," was the answer.

"Oh, yes, here's my Goojerat knife : how fortunate. I brought it down to show old Craven. Keep those pretty fingers out of the way : there !"

"Thank you," as she received the roses ; "fancy that little knife being sharp enough : do give it me for a paper knife."

"Sharp enough ! it can be got up to a dangerous point in a very few moments, my dear girl. No, I can't give it to you ; it might cut our friendship, you know : wait till it becomes yours, with all the rest of my worldly goods."

As they passed on, something dropped with a slight metallic ring. No one noticed the sound but the one behind the hedge. He waited till the coast was clear, and then cautiously crept through and picked up what the major supposed he had deposited safely in his coat pocket.

"She shan't have all she wants," Roger muttered, as

he looked at the little curious dagger. He drew it from its case, and in his excitement pressing his finger too hard upon the edge, the blood started from the little scar it made. "The devil's own language," he whispered, as fell thoughts crowded to his mind at the sight of the red blood on the Indian characters. His face turned almost livid as he wiped away the stain ; and thrusting the knife inside his coat, he shook his fist in the direction of the Manor.

"I'll not spoil your sport just yet," he cried between his clenched teeth ; "my vengeance shall be complete."





CHAPTER XXI.

UP AMIDST THE MOORS.

HIGH amidst forest-trees on the curving mountainous bank which shuts in the valley of the Wharfe, stands Higmoor Hall; backed by terraced gardens, with noiseless turf walks ascending one above the other, connected by broad mossy steps, till the highest overlooks the lichen-covered tiled roof of the old house. In these gardens summer flowers were yet rejoicing in their late bloom, and the woods which clothed the overhanging banks were yet untinged by autumnal hues when the Lances arrived in Yorkshire.

Very different from the stunted, sea-stricken trees of Purbeck were these great old oaks and elms and beeches, these luxuriant sycamores and far-spreading ash. These were in their prime when Prince Rupert rode beneath them to the fatal field of Marston Moor; they had rustled in chorus with the fluttering folds of the silken banners, worked by the fair hands of Henrietta and her attendant beauties, carried so proudly by gay love-locked cavaliers through these lonely woods. The banners had become defaced, blood-stained, shot-riddled, torn, time-stained, and lost sight of; but the lordly trees hung out fresh banners every spring, and when Death despoiled them of their leafy pennons, they fell to enrich and prepare the

parent stem for succeeding campaigns and successes. Many a summer had they whispered together of that gallant host that never returned. Many a winter had they groaned and bent in unavailing anger beneath the blast of the fierce north wind.

Up above all these giant trees, higher than the terraced gardens lie the moors, rugged and far-stretching; height succeeding height, waterfall answering waterfall. Deep-rutted, undulating roads lead away here and there to unseen and unthought-of villages and towns—villages and towns scarcely visible on the map, unknown out of the county, and whose only use seems to be in furnishing uncouth names for the county historian and raw recruits to enrich foreign shores and fill up hospital cemeteries in far-off lands. Vast wild moors, almost sublime in their grand loneliness and boundless extent—moors that inspire never-dying love and longing in the breasts of their children. The voice of innumerable falls is ever sounding; in summer gently and lulling, in winter roaring and leaping out of the crevices and hollows of the rocks. In winter impenetrable snows render the roads impassable for days, cutting off all intercourse between hamlets and towns, and rendering a journey of but a few miles a service of great peril. In the solitary farms the dead have lain for weeks unburied, and the feeble infant has given up its sinless life unconsecrated, because of the clergyman's sheer inability to reach the place.

Far away amidst their sheltered hollows one comes upon grim old houses overgrown with moss and house-leek, and brown as the moors with age—old dwellings to which are attached bygone stirring memories and scenes which one reflects on, fascinated by their horrors, though seen through the dust of centuries. Old manor houses, with steep roofs and deep iron-set windows,

wherein long ago stalwart yeomen and blithe Yorkshire lasses rose trembling in the dead of night to place food before noisy cavaliers, whose gold embroidery and priceless lace, royalist oaths, and drunken brutality, were made as welcome as the sour-visaged, leather-breeched Puritans who in their turn demanded the tardy hospitality of the helpless host. Still may be seen some sign or token of these unwelcome guests: some old door indented by the Brown Bess of a trooper, some rafter charred by the torch that was thrust up to bring to light hidden treasure. There inside that hollow panel my lord has kept his head on his shoulders for a little longer: that graceful head that is doomed to rot on London Bridge; there in the wide porch the family have collected to listen to the cheering sound of unfriendly footsteps dying away in the distance; from yonder height they have tremblingly watched the smoke from the far-off battle-field; and there in yonder gully they have hidden their lares.

Of yet earlier times still the moors can tell—of those thirty years and more when no man's life in broad England was safe, during those wars so poetically named the Wars of the Roses; for the moors and the falls had sheltered many an unhappy wretch who had lost all but his life; the long rugged tracks had baffled and wearied the pursuers, and the rushing waterfalls had deadened their keen ears and averted their thirsting eyes.

Standing on the very edge of these moors, Hig, or Highmoor Hall had, of course, many stirring memories of its own; some of them reaching back to the days of the Plantagenets, when Bolton Abbey first reared its stately form in solitary grandeur in the lonely dale; when it was called the "Priory," and fair sinners came hither from distant nunneries to expiate their follies in these wilds; when the villagers crossed themselves as they

passed the dreary abode, and the souging wind brought to their awe-struck ears dismal cries, uttered by some incarcerated wretch enduring the punishment of the Church !

But, to Mr. Lance, its only memories were those of his happy youth : the dark woods around and beneath were dearer to him than the bright cliffs and sunny lawns at Spireton ; the crash of the new-born river, and the broad dialect of the people, were familiar music ; the voice of the waters only spoke to him of speckled trout to be caught in abundance, of fishing exploits of his youth, of tender recollections of the girlhood of his children's mother.

The Hall overlooked the commencement of the beautiful valley to which the river gives its name, and which is formed by thickly-wooded precipitous banks. The immense growth of the trees, and the thickness of the underwood, give a sombre magnificence to this part of the valley, and the never-ceasing roar of the Wharfe springing into boisterous birth, seething and foaming in its first vigour, starting with sudden fury into life, with a crash equal to a park of artillery, renders the scene peculiarly impressive. Wordsworth has immortalised the "Strid of the Wharfe;" and its waters, deeply tinged with their long underground passage through the brown moorland, still pour out with the same turbulent uproar and overwhelming force as when, centuries ago, they frightened the craven hound, and caused his young lord to find an untimely death beneath them.

As the river spreads, so the valley widens ; but while the banks recede they lose nought of their precipitancy, gaining in height what they lose in bulk. The Abbey is hidden from the Hall by curving woods ; it stands despoiled of its youthful beauty, but still majestic in desola-

tion, while down the rugged sides of the hills around it, hurrying streamlets "wind their tributary course" to the ever-flowing river; and babbling brooks, murmuring gently round the consecrated ground, add their store with soft tinklings that seem to remonstrate with the angry clamour of the "strid."

Even in the full glow of the summer sun, the air is cool, moist, and exhilarating. Wild strawberries, raspberries, bilberries, and blackberries grow there with a profusion that would make a paradise to town-bred children; and the orchis and fern and moss, in unseen loveliness and grace, blossom, wither, and die with tints that would drive a London florist half wild with envy.

Mrs. Gabriel, who with her husband followed the rest of the family to this northern residence, did not appreciate all these delights; nor did she scruple to inform her particular friends that the house was a "wretched vault in a horribly damp neighbourhood at the very end of the world." But Mrs. Gabriel was not altogether pleased; for Lady Charles Bolton's rank and beauty, and Helen's importance as a fair *fiancée*, threw her, although she was the heir's wife, rather into the shade.

The whole family were collected for the approaching marriage. Several aunts, uncles, and cousins were come and coming, and Lord Charles and Bolton formed themselves into a "select committee" to make the occasion one of general rejoicing. Mr. Lance determined to feast all his tenants, and entertain his Yorkshire connections in Yorkshire style—a style that requires a long purse, an overflowing cellar, a well-filled larder, and a hearty welcome. He intended to introduce his eldest son to his future tenantry; for he was mindful of poor Gabriel's ignoble position on the twenty-first birthday, which should have been so different to what it was, and he wished to

show that he had confidence in his first-born, who, though lacking great abilities, had a sweetness of disposition, and a desire to do right that disarmed contempt, and compelled liking.

The people around were disposed to like everyone belonging to "the young squire," as Mr. Lance was still called ; but they did not forget it was owing to Gabriel's misconduct that the Hall had been so long in the hands of strangers : they also censured him for marrying a foreigner, instead of waiting till he could choose one of his own country. Mrs. Gabriel's nonchalance and accent were pronounced " queer ; " and the young man's listless manner and studied dress—" effeminate and fantastical ; " while his sister's charms of person, and Bolton's manliness and drollery, met with indisputable praise.

Lady Charles, who to a certain extent resembled her eldest brother, said that he was rapidly sinking into a mere puppet in the hands of his wife ; and she it was who incited her father to rouse his dormant faculties by bringing him more forward, and making him share his responsibilities.

" My dear love," said the squire, " it's a deal more trouble to explain things to him, than to do them myself. You see he can't even take the pains to choose his own dress : he's nothing but a bad copy of Vyvianne. If he hadn't fallen into Vyvianne's way, I make no doubt he'd have entirely gone to the bad ; and yet he's a good fellow ; as good a hearted fellow as ever lived ! "

" Indeed he is : see how fond my little Gay is of him ; and how proud he was yesterday, when the Crofts, misled by the similarity of name, congratulated him on his handsome son ! Many men would have felt envious, papa."

Gabriel returned Bertie's affection, and not a spark of

jealousy entered his mind when he saw her strong boy climbing the squire's knees, pulling his cigar from his mouth, and insisting on being instantly conveyed to Banbury Cross; he was thoroughly happy in his sister's society, charmed with Bolton, delighted with the universal bustle, and perfectly contented so long as he might idly overlook all.

The squire made one effort to follow out his daughter's hint.

"My dear boy," he said, "don't you think you and I had better go over the estate together? It will all be yours some day; you ought to know exactly how it stands, eh?"

"Ah, don't you see, it's such a bore; and really, father, Exell talks so uncouthly, and all that sort of thing; and the trout are rising so nicely!"

"Bad for you, my son, poring over the brook all day. I shouldn't think Annie approves of your inhaling the damp; you were out till nearly dark last night."

"Oh! yes, father, but don't you see she's so fond of fresh-water fish for breakfast: so there you are, you know."

And Gabriel with his rod and line, and the delightful ambition of pleasing his wife's appetite, took himself off daily, unquestioned: Mrs. Gabriel being perfectly satisfied that she was relieved of his company and left to her own devices; which, unless the major was there, or some equally fascinating visitor, consisted of lying on the sofa reading French novels.

Nelly, in a whirl of preparation, was yet able to spare a thought on the absent. A fortnight before her marriage she asked Constance if she had heard from the Gittenses, adding, "Does she mention that creature?"

"Whom?"

“Roger.”

“Yes, Aunt Gittens says he’s actually sailed for America, and she adds, ‘from whence he’s sure to come back, pretty sharp, like a bad penny—joy go with him.’”

“Gone!” Nelly interrupted, joyously, “actually gone! Oh, I am so glad. I don’t mind confessing to you now, Constance, that I really believe he was mad about me: I shudder when I think what he said the last time I saw him. I declare I did all I could to shorten your father’s stay at the Manor, fearing Roger would do him some injury.”

“Oh, Nelly! why did you ever encourage him?”

“I never did—at least one can’t always be on one’s guard; but I will allow this to you, that if I had my life to come over again, I would not behave as I have done. I am half sorry for Roger, while I hate him; and I wish I had never made poor Johnny believe I cared for him; but I’m going to be a pattern wife—so long as Con pleases me, that is! Isn’t this lace perfection?”

The major arrived soon, bringing no end of wedding finery, and the bustle increased in the Hall as the wedding day drew near; causing Gabriel, through fear of his father again begging him to join in the arrangements, to absent himself under pretence of fishing more constantly. Somehow he felt happier when sitting under the rocks, or on the grassy banks, with only the voices of nature around him, the shifting shadows on the ever-flowing water, the passing breeze rippling the tiny currents, and nothing else to disturb his placid thoughts, which ever turned on his sisters, his wife, and the little children who loved him so dearly.

One morning as he passed Bertha’s nursery, he looked in; it was quite early, and Bertie was hushing her baby to sleep. There was no line on the young mother’s fair

face, no care in her happy heart ; no trial had crossed her sunny path, no disappointment had wrinkled her open brow. Secure in her husband's love, without one regret for lost friends, the haughtiness of her girlhood had vanished before her married bliss, and, fully conscious of her singularly favoured position, the prayers that were ever ascending from her grateful heart had softened her countenance, and made it beam with a radiance which had its origin in heaven. Gently bending backwards and forwards, she sang to her little one, ceasing now and then to kiss softly the little waxen hand that had fastened in her long curls, or to hush into silence the restlessness of an elder child, who was impatient for her mother to hear her hymn that she might attack the basin of bread and milk prepared for her breakfast. Gabriel, leaning against the door, watched the scene ; presently the baby was laid in its cradle, the little fingers were unclasped and placed tenderly on the scarcely-heaving bosom ; the song grew faint and fainter ere it ceased entirely, and Bertie was at liberty to hear her little daughter.

Kneeling before her, with dimpled hands, supporting her rosy face, the child, with one eye on the breakfast and the other on her listening uncle, began,—

“One, two, three—oh, no, mamma ! For what we are going to receive—oh, please, mamma, what is it ?”

“Helen, God did not forget to take care of you all through the darkness,” said Bertha, gravely.

“I'll never do so any more,” lisped the child, penitently.

“The morning, bright with rosy light,
Has waked me from my sleep.
Father, I own, thy love alone
Thy little one doth keep.

"All through this day, I humbly pray,
Be thou my guard and guide ;
My sins forgive, and let me live,
Blest Jesus, by thy side."

Gabriel stepped softly out of the room : but the words floated in his mind, and in the quiet of the glen, while watching for the lazy trout to come out from the shelter of the banks, he dwelt upon the serenity of his sister's face, and the trusting devotion of the child's hymn, until he determined, "as soon as all the fuss is over, to have a talk to Bertie about all that sort of thing."

Two or three days before the wedding, Mr. Lance came out on the lawn to inquire for the major ; he was not there, only Lord Charles rolling his little son down the sloping turfed pathway, and Bertha and Constance dancing the baby by turns.

"He has gone down the valley," said Constance ; "shall I run after him for you ?"

"Gabriel is trying to coax the major to let him wear the same suit as *he* will at the wedding," said Bertie ; "it is quite laughable to hear them grauing : of course Major Vyvianne wishes to be an unmistakable bridegroom."

"So," added Lord Charles, "Vyvianne has taken him off to show him a famous haunt for trout, to pacify him. I would go and bring him back for you, but important business prevents me."

"Don't believe him," exclaimed his wife, "he is the laziest man imaginable—the plague of my existence ! I know what his important business is ; he and Bolton are going to taste that horrid "black beer," under pretence of learning if it will be fit for Thursday."

"No !" he retorted ; "I am merely going to steady Bolton ; he shall do all the tasting, not I : none but a

Yorkshire stomach could stand such a villanous compound ; it's like flat strong porter made hot, and mixed with gin and spices. Bah ! it's dreadful ! ”

“ A libel ! ” cried Bolton, suddenly appearing : “ evil communications corrupt female manners ; therefore, Charley, I shall take you away at once ; ” and like overgrown schoolboys the two ran noisily off, while Constance went in search of her father.

She might well be so ready to offer to go ; the woods were so pleasant in the noonday heat, the peeps through the trees so delightful, the little path she took ran in zig-zag course midway up the bank, and the tangled underwood on either side stopped her momentarily to gather the tempting dewberries. All things have an end, however, so had this path ; it stopped abruptly opposite the Strid, to which it descended precipitously, and Constance, before taking its downward curve, looked around : she had not far to look ; there, on the wet rock close to the foaming tumbling waters, stood her father and Gabriel Lance. The gushing water with its neighbouring masses of stone lay in complete shadow between its guardian banks at the bottom of the narrow valley, while up above, the glorious trees revelled freely in the sunshine and tossed their luxuriant foliage in the tumultuous wind.

It would be of no avail for anyone to try to shout—shout they ever so loudly—to attract attention so close to the roaring Strid ; for its violent joy in its new-found freedom deadened every other sound : and Constance did not attempt. She stood hoping one of them would turn and see her light dress amidst the dark background ; meantime she amused herself by noting the similarity between the two figures, both so tall and graceful, both dressed precisely alike.

To her, however, the difficulty of distinguishing them was slight; it needed but a glance to detect Gabriel by the backward set of his hat, and by the narrow shoulders, which even the addition of a scarf beneath the coat could not bring to the same envied dimensions as his pattern friend's. The fishing tackle was dropped carelessly on a stone, and both the young men were absorbed in conversation; or, as it seemed to her, disputation: Major Vyvianne was gesticulating earnestly, and as his daughter fancied angrily; Gabriel replied as emphatically.

Her heart stood still as her father suddenly seized on his companion, and holding him close to the rocky chasm, appeared about to dash him into its foaming depths. Down like an arrow she flew; but as she reached the place, Gabriel freed himself, snatched up his tackle, bounded in safety over the Strid, and thence looking back, he brandished his rod jeeringly, and disappeared amongst the trees. Major Vyvianne, screaming after him, and vainly trying to out-sound the water, at length turned to see his daughter. To her surprise his face was full of glee.

"We have been rehearsing a play we acted in India," he said; "he has forgotten nearly the whole of his part already. What a lazy dog he is!" and in merry mood he condescended to run a race with Constance, to see who could ascend the hill the soonest. While she, scolding herself for her unworthy fears, darted lightly in advance and triumphantly reached the top, to wait laughingly for him to join her, in panting discomfiture at his failure.

The day before the wedding arrived, the road up to the house was gay with triumphal arches; nothing re-

mained to be done but the flowery decorations inside, which were kept to the last, and the whole party were pressed into this service, Nelly alone excepted. She had plenty to occupy her in superintending the packing of her finery. All the morning was spent in indefatigable wreath-making and column-twining ; but after luncheon, deserters thinned the ranks, and Gabriel even dared to act against his wife's wishes.

"I've had enough hard work," he said ; "I get nothing but thorns to cut off : look at my hand, it's scratched in all directions."

"Ah ! don't !" she exclaimed affectedly ; "you know I can't bear the sight of blood. Well, take your rod, then, and go : but I think you very selfish."

"Come with me, Annie, it's so quiet and peaceful in the fairies' dell. Constance and Bertie can finish the flowers : there's only the drawing-room to do : they work like niggers."

"Thank you ; but I flatter myself I have a happy knack of wreathing pictures, so be off alone."

She was standing on a high stool, tying flowers round a mirror, and chatting gaily with a gentleman guest, when Gabriel came to say good-bye again ; his tender conscience accusing him of selfishness, even while he remained decided upon going.

"What, not gone yet !" cried his wife, without looking round at him. "Well, good-bye, and please leave your bad temper with your dear friends the fish."

"What time does the dancing begin to-night ?" he asked.

"About nine ; and the Crofts are coming, so mind you are back in time to dress : we are not to have a late dinner, only a Yorkshire tea at seven ; if you are not home by then, you'll have to go without."

He laughed good-humouredly, and went away, but only to appear again at the open window with—

“Good-bye to you all again ; good-bye, my Annie.”

She jumped down, and ran to him, saying,—

“Poor little fellow, he wants a kiss, I dare say there, now, don’t fall into the water.”

Perfectly satisfied, off he started ; but turned before he had crossed the gravel walk.

“Oh, Annie,” he exclaimed, “I say, I’ve left my watch up stairs : lend me yours, there’s a good girl.”

“*Non, merci* : you might be robbed and murdered by the fairies ; and I particularly value my little watch. You must guess the time by the shadows.”

“Well, send some one over the hill to tell me, for I never know how time goes. Constance, dear, you are a good girl ; give me a friendly shout, will you, about seven. You need only go on the hill outside the avenue, don’t you see ?”

“Yes, she will,” replied Annie : “now, good-bye. Dear me ! so many good-byes, one would suppose we were never to meet again.”

“Good-bye. Oh ! I say, just find out for me what Vyvianne means to wear to-night ; and let Brown have the same ready for me : don’t you see ?”

“All right ; now, for the very last time, good-bye.”

When all the decorations were pronounced perfect, the ladies dispersed to their own rooms ; the gentlemen having played truant long since, under pretence of looking after the arrangements in the barns where the tenantry were to dine.

About half-past six, Bolton and Constance, who *chanced* to meet in the billiard-room when all the rest were dressing for the evening, were enjoying a little private conversation, forgetting everything but them-

selves, when Annie, radiant in satin and lace, interrupted them.

"Oh, Constance!" she cried, "I would not trouble you, but you are not dressed, and I can't find a servant at liberty. There's Gabriel, you know; he'll never think of coming home unless he's fetched."

"Oh, I remember, I promised to go."

"I'll go," cried Bolton. "Oh, no! I promised my father to write to York, about those confounded horses: but come along, Constance, I'll see you as far as the gate: that is, if you really mean to go?"

"Indeed, I do: I long for some fresh air."

As they crossed the hall, Major Vyvianne came down the stairs.

"Constance! surely you are not going out; you ought to be already dressed?"

"I promised to run over the hill to call Gabriel, Papa. I can dress in no time."

"I shall not change mine," said Bolton, glancing significantly at the major's pearl-coloured satin breeches, his wonderful stockings, and flashing shoe-buckles. "I'll keep near some one who will attract all the attention! Now, Constance, come at once, or I cannot accompany you a step."

"Give my love," cried Annie, after them; "make him come at once: say we're waiting tea, and are all in fits of despair."

The rapid walk of the young couple soon slackened as they entered the avenue. Private walks had become very rare since the bustle of the wedding commenced; and Bolton, notwithstanding his just professed haste, dawdled as if the day was yet young, and nothing else required his attention. They were just three times as long in reaching the entrance gate as they need have

been, and even when there, they stopped in the shade to admire the view, they said ; but as they seemed admiring each other, that could have been but an excuse.

Yet the view was very alluring. The great trees of the avenue terminated on the verge of the spreading moor, and the glowing sunlight flooded the open ground. Right opposite, the western sky, gorgeously beautiful, illuminated the vast reach of undulating moorland, and darted its piercing rays to the very depths of the shadowy vale of Wharfe, cresting with amber the foaming river, and making the plunging waterfalls resplendent with gold and violet ; while even the grim tower of the Abbey was bright in the universal radiance, and the old Hall reflected back the glitter on its deep-set mullioned windows. The woods around, their foliage changing into the variegated tints of early autumn, looked like giant warriors in burnished armour, the advanced guard of approaching night !

At last Constance exclaimed,—

“I must go now : and recollect your letter to York !”

“Stay one little moment longer ; I have something very particular to tell you, but I can’t for the life of me remember what.”

“No ; I shall never be dressed in time for tea, and papa will look horrified !”

She passed out of the shadowing trees into the full sunlight ; the golden light played on her bright hair, and made her fair complexion transparently brilliant : her lover might be pardoned for trying to keep so fair a picture a little longer before him.

Only youth and health can stand the searching test of streaming sunshine ; only the unwrinkled brow, the faultless teeth, the clear eyes, can come out spotless under its fiery ordeal ; to Constance it lent an additional

beauty, and round her fair uncovered hair it seemed to radiate with celestial glory.

"You would do for the embodiment of light," he said, admiringly; "that pink gown is a decided 'hit' against the green background."

"I will not stay to hear such nonsense," she cried, going on backwards; "you are laughing at my poor crumpled gown, but I will appear in one presently that will astonish your weak mind: papa brought me such a beauty!"

"Do tell me what it is like," he exclaimed, just to detain her.

"Blue and yellow, spotted with green and red; don't you think it must be charming? Now I'm really going."

The radiant glow upon her smiling face, the tender look that triumphed over the saucy sparkle of her dark eyes, the grace of her figure, and the clear sweetness of her happy voice, floated round Bolton, as he retraced his steps through the deepening shade of the avenue. It should be his privilege, he thought, to keep unshadowed that laughter-loving face, to remove all cares from before those girlish footsteps, to merit the sweetness of those loving eyes, to cherish through life the regard of that warm heart.



CHAPTER XXII.

THE VALLEY OF DESOLATION.

CONSTANCE reached the brow of the hill, at the foot of which the trout stream meandered through a little dell so plentifully favoured by nature, so secluded and so sheltered, as to have acquired the local name of "the fairies' glen." There the roar of the waterfall was inaudible, and from thence the infant river looked but a silvery thread winding through a gorge; while, on the other side, looking across the little dell beneath, the moors stretched away, broken here and there by rugged masses of rock and by climbing roads, losing themselves in the purple distance. The sun was sinking, and loaded waggons were making their last journey from the harvest fields to the scattered homesteads in the hollows. In the middle distance rose the great beacon, from whose summit in clear weather the whole Vale of York was visible, terminated by the shadowy towers of its beautiful minster; its height was increased now on account of the gigantic mass of brushwood collected upon it, to blaze forth on the following night in honour of Nelly's marriage.

The village of Higmoor was hidden from her view; it lay behind yonder gorge of rock, but the sound of its church bells floated upwards, mingled with the voices of

children at play, the creak of heavily-laden waggons, the cheery song of the labourer going home from his work, and the caw of the rooks circling lazily over their ancestral homes in the tops of the avenue trees.

Yet she was alone : no human being was visible : the sounds around her prevented her feeling afraid in the solitude, and the light of the sunset still streamed around her. As she listened to the melodious chimes, the voices of her heart joined in the glad jubilee, and her fancy revelled in pleasant dreams called forth by their harmony. Dreams of her own wedding chimes, heralding long years of happiness ; dreams of a faithful, loving heart ever at hand to guide her aright ; of a strong kind arm ever ready to assist ; of a peaceful home, bright with mutual love and forbearance, perhaps noisy with little voices lisping her name and his in trusting tenderness ; of declining days lightened by fervent esteem and friendship, the mellowed essence of the love of their ardent youth ; and of a parting, not for ever, but hopeful of a glorious reunion in the mysterious region of eternal fellowship beyond the sky.

Absorbed in these visions, she was roused to remembrance of her mission by the failing light, and the cessation of the pealing bells ; their silence allowed another sound to become audible : a sound strangely at variance with the glad forerunner. It boomed very faintly through the clear sleeping air, but none the less heavily did it fall on the young girl's happy heart : it was a far-off death knell in one of the remote villages on the moors.

"Ah ! how dismal !" she cried, and running down the hill, she lost no more time in executing her long-delayed commission. Some water-fowl plunged into the stream as she gained the bottom of the glen, and a heron flew upwards from his dainty supper among the reeds ; but

there were no other signs of life : the harebells dozed on their tiny stalks, the blue iris held its stately head aloft in supreme indifference of all besides : the silver birch, and weeping willows, hung over the water enamoured of their own graceful forms ; the air was heavy with the scent of honeysuckle and wild clematis, and nothing stirred but the pale forget-me-nots growing close to the water's edge, which seemed to shiver in the chill damp touch of the running stream. The twilight was gathering over the brook, and creeping up the banks : the place *was* rather lonely to visit so late, alone ; but Gabriel must be here. She raised her voice and called aloud, " Gabriel ! " No answer. The little dell was so small, she could see, even in this light, from end to end, unless he was hiding behind a bush : but Gabriel never played those tricks. Could he have gone round by the village ? Hardly ! he never cared to extend his walk unnecessarily.

Ah, now she knew ! he must have followed the stream to its source in the valley beyond : that Valley of Desolation whose dreary blighted aspect had suggested its melancholy name, and furnished the ignorant peasants with tales of unearthly horrors.

She hardly liked going there after him ; but the idea of being laughed at, if she returned alone after volunteering her services, made her determine to proceed, and she ran along by the curving bank without giving herself time to reflect.

The fairies' glen, with its miniature Alpine scenery, turned suddenly at one end : so suddenly that the opposite bank seemed completely to oppose a barrier to any further outlet ; but the stream flowed onward round its base, leaving just room enough on dry land for the adventurous pedestrian. As it rounded the protruding side, however, it left behind the beauties that adorned its

murmuring course, and its ripples broke harshly and angrily as it entered the Valley of Desolation.

Often as Constance had entered this valley, it had never before appeared so gloomy. The huge, misshapen logs lying in chaotic heaps, the high, bare, steep sides showed in all their naked boldness; the gaunt skeletons of trees that might have budded and blossomed before the Flood, but never since, standing out like spectres from the clefts of the rocks; the foaming water falling from the further end over the unyielding causeway to its stony bed beneath, its roaring unchecked by moss or reeds, and echoed back by the sterile, closed-in, stony banks: the utter absence of all vegetable matter, the utter desolation of all gave the idea of primæval days, when "the earth was without form and void." The very breeze which had forborne to lift a leaf in the fairy dell she had just quitted, moaned fitfully through this death-stricken region, as if it were the evil spirit lamenting the sad destiny of this forlorn spot. The timid dove released from the ark might have looked on such a scene when she shudderingly winged her way back to the friendly hand outstretched to give her shelter. And the waters of the Flood, when driven off the face of the earth, may, in the bitterness of their exit, have left a curse from which this valley could not recover. Whatever was the cause of this death in life—this weird-like blot on Nature's blooming lap, there lies the valley; puzzling the thoughtful, confounding the learned, and presenting an insoluble problem to generations of baffled mortals.

"Gabriel!" cried Constance, hesitating as she entered the gloomy place: "Gabriel!" but only the rocks flung back her cry, and the wind swept round her, as if in mockery. "I will go as far as the big stone, and call again," she said; "if he is not here, I will climb up and

go home by the high-road," for the idea of retracing her steps through the narrow gully and the darkening dell was not agreeable in this fading light.

She gained the stone, and again cried,—

"abriel !"

Not a sound ! not even the charming bells could penetrate the high rocks that closed in around.

One more attempt.

"Gabriel !"

No reply !

"Of course, it is folly to remain longer: Bolton made me loiter so sadly, we must have missed him somehow."

With this thought, she began to ascend the rocks—no very easy task ; for the shade had gathered thickly, and prevented her seeing the little pathway ; however, she was agile enough, and made light work of the rough ascent, only she happened to come across the bed of a little rivulet, which trickled on her feet in its way to join the stream.

"How annoying !" she said ; "the idea of a brooklet at this time of year !" and, springing aside to avoid it, her foot slipped, and she stumbled, and fell.

* * * *

A Yorkshire tea in all its glory bespread the table, and a very merry and brilliant company clustered round it. Cakes of every description, from the "fat rascals"—those dreadful compounds of cream, eggs, flour, and currants, eaten hot and buttered, without any ill effects on Yorkshire constitutions—to Annie's favourite Sally Lunn's, mingled with jams, potted meats, raised pies, fruit, and biscuits, while on the sideboard lay famous Yorkshire hams and other substantials for the gentlemen.

Like a kindly hostess, Mrs. Lance herself superintended the tea-urn ; not having fallen into the new-fangled custom of having the tea sent up from the kitchen, either so strong that no one could drink it and sleep, or so weak it disclosed the pattern at the bottom of the cup, and, in both instances, cold ; while Bertie, at the opposite end, dispensed coffee and smiles. The windows were not closed, though the room was brilliantly lighted, and the fragrance of the garden floated above the smell of viands. The major moved in and out, handsome and merry, having a compliment and a sweet smile for every fair face around him. Nelly, surrounded by a bevy of cousins—bridesmaids elect—"did the bewitching" most effectively, and Annie kept the beaux in a perpetual flutter about her.

Only Bolton seemed abstracted ; once or twice he asked the servants if Miss Vyvianne had returned.

"Don't know, Sir—I'll ask."

But the question remained unanswered, till the squire, who had been absorbed in an agricultural disputation, suddenly exclaimed, after glancing round the well-filled room,—

"Where is Constance ? Why is not the child here ? and Gabriel, too—what has become of them both ?"

"Constance went to call Gabriel : I suppose she is now dressing," said the major, contentedly attitudinising for the benefit of a pretty woman close by.

"I think they have eloped," cried Annie gaily.

"I'll go and see," said Bolton, delighted to have an excuse for satisfying himself ; "no doubt, Gay loitered, as he always does."

And he went out into the hall, in which the dying daylight through the open doors struggled with the lamplight interior.

"Has the captain come home ?" he enquired.

"Don't know, Sir ; I'll call the captain's man."

Up came that grand personage.

"No, the captain 'as not comed hin, unless he 'ave slipt hup stairs while I was getting my glove mended, Sir."

Bolton ran up the wide staircase, and tapped at Constance's door : the room was unoccupied.

Coming back down the passage, he opened his brother's dressing-room : it was dark and empty, the breeze rushed in through the open window, and moaned through the room ; the sofa was covered with the evening toilette ; all was in readiness but the wearer.

"It's very extraordinary," he muttered, as he leapt down the stairs again ; "nothing can possibly have happened ?"

He put on his hat, however, without returning to the dining-room, and went into the garden. His momentary anxiety vanished as he stepped briskly along the lawn, over which the lights from the house streamed cheerfully. At the beginning of the avenue he paused and listened : had there been any footsteps within a quarter of a mile, he must have heard them in the stillness : but there was no sound. "It's no use going to the gate," he thought, "they may be coming through the gardens. I'll go back, and up the first steps, and call."

Back past the illuminated rooms into the dark gardens, up the first mossy steps whistling softly the while he briskly advanced. But still no sign of the truants. The noises from the house could be faintly heard, and dead leaves falling through the branches near at hand ; a distant trickle of water, too, was audible, but nought beside : the birds were silent, the moon had not yet risen, and the gloaming was rapidly changing into night ! Yes, at last there was something—a rustle of garments, a form indistinguishable advancing towards him ; he stood still and

watched it come down the second terrace steps, with slow wavering movement. Higmoor was rich in ghosts; was this the shade of some fair nun haunting the precincts of her unhappy imprisonment? It came nearer, it was flesh and blood. Nearer still, when, seeing Bolton, it stopped short, and stood as if undecided, and then he knew it was Constance.

"Constance!" he cried. "Ah! good God, what is it?"

She had raised her hand to keep him from her, and only a hoarse murmur issued from her lips. Again, she tried to articulate, but the news she had to tell refused to form into words; she pointed to her dress, her hands, her feet; they were wet with dark stains. Great horror seized him; he drew her rapidly down without another question; but as they reached the light from the windows, he stopped and looked upon her.

"Shoes, gown, and hands, all caked with blood, her face deadly white, her eyes burning with agony, her teeth parted in frantic efforts to speak.

"Oh, tell me!" he cried, "my darling, my poor darling, are you hurt—is Gabriel?—what is it—where?"

She pointed to herself and shook her head, and then pointed back in the direction of the valley; but the power of speech was denied her.

Quick as thought, he led her away from the noisy quarter of the house, and entering his father's room by a side door, he lighted the lamp, and placed pen and ink before her; while, tenderly as a mother, he drew an easy chair to the table, and seated her, saying,—

"Can you write?"

Her palsied hands could not hold the pen; she looked up, as if imploring his patience.

He soothed her with loving words, and encouraged

her as if no impatient alarm was curdling at his heart ; and guiding her trembling fingers, he learned the fatal truth.

At this moment, Lord Charles came in.

" Ah ! " he cried, " so this is how you amuse—Ah, Constance ! what ! "

" Look here ! " said Bolton, lifting up his face, haggard with sudden sorrow ; " she seems dumb ! Look at this ! "

Lord Charles read the scrawl, it was,—

" Gabriel lies dead—murdered—in the Valley of Desolation ! "

The young men looked at each other, then at the girl ; who, exhausted with her effort, lay back, shuddering.

" Something must be done at once," whispered Bolton. " Fetch the major : don't tell the women yet. "

In a few instants Major Vyvianne appeared. Constance started from her seat, her eyes dilating, her gaze roaming round, as if in search of some place of concealment : the hoarse rattle in her throat vainly striving at distinct utterance. Then by a visible effort she controlled herself, and shrinking back in the chair, with her hand tightly pressed upon her breast, she mutely answered his hurried questions.

By degrees the awful intelligence became known through the house. Mr. Lance came, and, with surprising self-possession, gave prompt orders. Mrs. Lance was there, too, sitting close to Constance. One or two magistrates who were among the guests, took their places at the table. People came hurriedly in and out. Whenever the door was opened, hysterical cries of women were heard ; and towards midnight a heavy tramp of measured feet announced the arrival of the body.

Bolton, Lord Charles, the major, and the doctor, who had all been to fetch it, came into the room, and the

magistrates rose, and with them went away. After about half an hour's absence they returned, and then when they briefly reported that all hope was over—that Gabriel had been dead some hours—the squire became utterly unnerved.

“We will leave you, my dear Sir,” said Mr. Croft.

“No, no,” he said; “let me know all particulars at once. But that poor child there, let her go to bed!”

But Constance shook her head: she could write down anything they wanted; she would rather give her evidence now.

So the investigation began, as formally as the cruel circumstances permitted.

The doctor gave as his opinion that death had been caused by a gunshot wound in the back and an incision of some sharp-pointed instrument, possibly a clasp-knife, in the heart.

Constance eagerly listened to every word, and her hands pressed closer to her breast as the doctor spoke.

“Would the gun-shot wound have been fatal alone?”

“Undoubtedly.”

“Could he say which wound was inflicted first?”

“Yes, that from the gun: probably it had been fired from the distance behind, and the knife had been used to make sure: he said *knife*; though no weapon of any sort had been picked up.”

“Had the place been rigidly searched?”

“As rigidly as was possible by lantern-light. In the morning the ground would be again investigated.”

“Now, Miss Vyvianne, how did you discover the body?”

“I stumbled over it in climbing up from the valley. I was not aware of it, though the blood was trickling down upon me, until I saw the upturned face.”

"And you immediately guessed who it was?"

"Not until I looked closely, then there was no——"

She shuddered and dropped her pen.

The doctor feared she was overtaxing her strength, and all present begged her to try and get rest; but she refused, and with many an inward prayer for help, showed no further weakness as she continued her written evidence.

"There was no mistake when I saw his eyes: of course I knew he was murdered, by the pool of blood in which he lay."

Describe his position: we wish to know if it was undisturbed when the bearers reached the spot?"

"He was lying sideways with his left arm doubled under him; his right hand yet held his fishing rod, his face was turned upwards."

It was evident his position was the same.

"Did you hear any unaccountable noise either before you reached the spot or afterwards?"

"No."

"Did you see any weapon lying about?—any article excepting the tackle?"

Her fingers hesitated, and the shudder passed over her again as she at last wrote,—

"No."

"Did you touch the body? And why did so long a time elapse between your going to the valley and your return?"

Bolton here interposed.

"We remained some time talking at the gate," he said: "the sun was setting when we parted; I, to return home, she to look for my brother."

"I was slightly stunned by my fall," wrote Constance; "for my feet slipped in the blood, and I had some diffi-

culty in walking home, and then I dreaded telling my dreadful tale."

The squire stroked her head, and regarded her with tender compassion. Then Major Vyvianne was asked,—

"Did he, having been the deceased's most intimate friend, know of any quarrel that could possibly have resulted in this violent act, between him and anyone either in India or England?"

The answer came unhesitatingly.

"No; no disagreeable circumstance of any kind connected with my late friend ever occurred to my knowledge either abroad or at home: no one was more deservedly popular in his regiment."

"Could any disagreeable occurrence have taken place without your knowledge?"

"Hardly. I believe the deceased placed implicit confidence in me; and in Indian society, secret actions are almost impossible. I think I must have known, had he been implicated in any quarrel."

"On your oath, Sir," the magistrate bowed courteously as he spoke, "you can furnish no clue, however slight; you can recollect no provocation, however apparently trivial, by which Captain Lance could have incurred such devilish revenge: I am aware there are codes of honour among gentlemen of your profession that sometimes retard the ends of justice?"

"On my honour," said the major, "I can safely swear that I do not believe Captain Lance had an enemy in the world; his disposition prevented such a possibility: this deed of darkness overpowers me with its mysterious improbability."

Mr. Lance tearfully thanked him for his kindly mention of the dead, and the magistrates whispered together in deepening wonder. As the night passed away, men

who had been scouring the neighbourhood kept returning with disappointment. There was no trace to the murderer; not the faintest: the short dry grass retained no footmarks, the dusty roads no strange impress. No loiterer had been observed; no firing had been heard; the village inns had harboured no unknown guest. There had been a picnic party at the Strid during the day, as was usual at this time of year; but it was of the general class of pleasure-seekers, visitors from Harrogate or Ilkley, far above suspicion.

With the first streak of dawn, Bolton and Lord Charles returned to the Valley of Desolation, in the vain hope of finding some weapon, but without success; only the reddened grass and stones bore witness to the bloody scene that had so lately been enacted there. On their return, dispirited and weary, the magistrates rose, and further inquiry was postponed until the inquest.

As the door was opened for Constance and Mrs. Lance to leave the room, a little night-gowned figure sprang forward, and darting to the squire, cried,—

“Oh, grandpapa! is it true, is my pretty uncle dead?”

It was Bertha's eldest boy, little Gay.

His blue eyes and fair curling hair vividly recalled to the squire the babyhood of that other Gabriel, who now lay weltering in blood; he clasped his arms round the little form, and burst into uncontrollable weeping.

“Oh, my boy, my boy!”

Lord Charles tried to draw the child away, but he clung to his grandfather.

“Let me stay!” he pleaded. “Grandpapa, dear grandpapa, God won't love you if you cry: he has taken Uncle Gay to heaven: indeed it is true, for mamma says so. Uncle Gay is a bright angel now, singing in the blue

sky ; he has soft white wings, and will never be naughty or sorry any more."

The innocent, earnest faith checked and comforted the bereaved father ; he lifted the boy to his knee, and kissed his rosy lips, while the child added, lovingly,—

"I will be your Gabriel now, dear grandpapa." And the love so frankly offered was accepted as a gift from the pitying "Lord of All."

Bolton was at Constance's side as she passed out of the closed room, with its glaring lamps, into the broad daylight of the hall. At the open door they stood silently inhaling the fresh air, which, cool with the breath of advancing autumn, refreshed their aching heads. The mist of early morning shrouded the narrow valley beneath them and rose above the woods ; the sun had not risen, but the sky was blushing at his approach, and there was a stir in Nature, a quivering as if her mighty heart quickened with glad expectancy. In all their terrible misery the young people remembered that other early morning they had spent together, side by side, then as now ; but with what different feelings ! How short a time had elapsed since, yet what an insurmountable barrier had arisen between them !

A servant entering the house turned to look at Constance with horror and pity in his gaze ; she, reminded of her forlorn appearance, her gown stiffened with human blood, her neglected hair and besmeared hands, suddenly looked up at Bolton : would he shrink from her with loathing ?

Ah, yes, if he knew all ; but in his eyes, from which grief had chased away the mirth that had ever lurked in them until now, she read the deepest love and tenderest commiseration only.

She turned from his glance, and, placing her arm in his step-mother's, accompanied the latter up stairs.

At last she was alone in her own room, with blinded windows and locked doors, at liberty to give way to the pent-up agony that threatened almost to overturn her reason. Having searched every corner, and satisfied herself that no human eye overlooked her proceedings, she crouched down on her knees close to her bed, and drew from her bosom her father's Indian knife : that little knife, whose appearance close to Gabriel's corpse had inflicted as deep a stab to her heart as to his. This it was that had deprived her of speech, and made her look upon her handsome father as a perjured murderer.

There was no mistake ; here were the hieroglyphics, the bright arabesques, the quaint idol-headed shaft smeared and still wet with blood : the deed so mysterious to others, to her was damningly clear, and while, with streaming eyes and quivering frame, she prayed to be mistaken, she yet dared not attempt to reason against the conviction. The scene at the Strid returned with overwhelming force, and her father's apparent boyish mirth there, only agreed with the levity displayed yesterday when his victim was weltering in death. She remembered he had left the drawing-room earlier than the others : might he not, while he was supposed to be in his own room, have left the house unobserved in the general bustle, and tracked Gabriel to his doom ? But was it possible that he could immediately afterwards countenance her going to seek Gabriel ? Ah ! did he not object, and join the family whose happiness he had so basely destroyed, with a face beaming with smiles ? Such conduct showed a depth of depravity almost impossible. Writhing in the fierceness of her agony, she tried to assure herself it could not be ; but there lay the knife !

Here a flash of relief for one instant lightened her sinking heart: was it likely that a man who could so skilfully and stealthily perpetrate so horrible a deed—could compose his looks so effectually, and unassisted baffle the minutest and strictest inquiries—who could delude even the very victim himself—would yet fail in so signal a manner as to leave behind him the tell-tale instrument to testify to his guilt? Yes; she acknowledged even this was possible. The best laid schemes have miscarried by one little act of forgetfulness: the deepest schemers have often overreached themselves: it *was* possible, nay probable, that in the momentary panic created by the knowledge that he was accursed for ever, the deadly weapon had dropped from his trembling hands, and been forgotten.

But why such deadly enmity? They had, seemingly, lived together as brothers; Gabriel's admiration for his friend was a family joke: could there lie beneath this so intense a hate? Not with Gabriel; his admiration *was* real, and if he had ever injured the major, or been the cause of injury to him, it must have been through inadvertency, and atoned for and forgotten by him long ago. Major Vyvianne was a very different character. Self-confident and self-reliant, his was the nature to wait and plot, never to forgive and forget. Supposing this to be the case, and that Gabriel really had come between him and his desires in some unknown way, why should he revenge himself at a time when he must mar his own happiness? Here, again, comfort was denied him: in the blackest hearts some tiny spark of compunction ever lingers, some shadow of the better nature loath to forsake entirely the breast that had once been innocent; might he not, while determined to destroy the peace of a family, yet hesitate to link Nelly to his stained and accursed fate?

The horror of these surmises called forth fresh sobs and moans : it could not, must not be as she supposed. Yet there lay the knife, and in the room below lay the corpse with the gaping death-wound it had made. No shot had been heard ; but who amongst the crowd of busy servants and guests had leisure to notice outward sounds ? The very fact that no report was audible strengthened her horrible conviction : she knew her father had an air gun when he was at Spireton.

It was so : it must be so : reason with herself as she would, mutely invoke Heaven as she did, the certainty pressed heavier—the certainty of her only parent being a murderer ; not a passionate repentant man-slayer, but a cold-blooded soul-stained criminal. And yet, her father—her young mother's boy-husband ! Her father ! Did not the very fact of her remarkable dumbness seem a sign from Heaven to seal her lips against accusing the author of her being of crime ? And *her* footsteps alone being guided to the spot made her the guardian of his forfeited life. The same Almighty hand that permitted the deed, and hid the identity of the doer from every eye save hers, had surely by so doing made it strongly sensible that in her eyes he must still be sacred.

In her infancy, her mind had become strongly imbued with the superstition so rife among the native servants : and though during Mrs. Gittens's *régime* that strong-minded female had wisely kept down the girl's foolish notions, yet in her subsequent life with her aunts, they had been fostered and revived : for in the last generation beliefs in omens, and witches, and supernatural appearances had hardly died away, and the educated and talented of the last century were almost as credulous and absurd as their rapping and tapping descendants of the present day.

Thus interpreting the strangeness of her sudden deprivation of speech, and of *her* eyes being the first to discover the body and the identifying weapon, she acknowledged herself as the guardian of the criminal's secret.

Yet why should the great Judge wish to screen such an act?

Perhaps she was reserved to work out his repentance, and, by incessant petitions to the throne of grace, to save his soul alive, and, in future years, to see him abased and truly penitent. In future years! how could she drag on an existence hateful and embittered by this overwhelming knowledge? Oh, for death to take her graciously from this torturing life! Yesterday such a wish would have been madness, to-day the idea was rapturous.

She *could* not meet her father again; could not speak as usual; could not bear his hypocritical consolations, or suffer his caresses.

"Oh, merciful Death, who takest the bright, the beloved, the household's treasure, the poor man's one lamb. Oh! inscrutable destroyer, who passeth over the solitary mourner longing to be at rest with those who have gone before, who leavest the weary sufferer, the useless cripple! have pity upon the darling, the useful, the beautiful, and take me instead—take me before I have to shrink under the finger of scorn, pointing me out as the child of a murderer; take me before I am deserted and hated, before I see those who have loved me turn away with loathing!"

Thus she prayed and raved in the sobbing silence of her dumbness; envying the dead body's calm repose, envying the spirit released so early from the burthen of the flesh; while rapid thoughts of what would be done if

her father's guilt was yet discovered—above all, of what *she* would do—coursed through her whirling brain. For an instant she could not answer that thought concerning her own behaviour—only for an instant—and then a glad tide of filial love rushed to her chilled heart; love that had flowed sluggishly when he had stood in his beauty and self-reliance, secure in the world's approval and his own proud strength; but which now—picturing him friendless, persecuted, hated—leapt into the full stream of filial, all enduring tenderness: that wondrous affection so pure and sinless, that one faint reflection of Almighty love, the only unsullied trait of heavenly life permitted to be retained on earth—the love that exists between parent and child.

She did not try to account for this sudden change of feeling, but hailed it as a help from above. Now she could live to succour him when all else failed him; to guard his crime from detection, and in God's good time, to save his soul. Already, she had saved his life while giving her evidence. But one act alone was not the only sacrifice she would be called upon to make. Her whole life must be a daily, hourly sacrifice, in thought, word and deed; she must be ever vigilant; she must avoid the solace of friendship, lest, in a moment of feminine weakness, the word might drop prejudicial to her father's honour. No womanly fears must frighten her from her self-imposed task; no yearning to ease her conscience must deter her from her labour of love. She must strengthen her body lest its weakness should overpower the vigour of her mind: she must ever sleep with locked doors, lest even her dreams should betray her.

There was yet another sacrifice, imperative over all—the sacrifice of her fair hopes, her holy, happy dreams.

Bolton must be given up ; not regretfully, nor sufferingly : he must hear no heart-broken sighs, must see no lingering fondness ; he must believe her faithless, fickle, base—anything rather than the truth. In this, as in all her future life, she must act a part ; she must be deaf to his entreaties, deaf to the pleading of her own heart. There must be no uncertainty ; he and everyone must understand that their engagement was at an end for ever : and if gentle measures were useless, she must, if possible, make him deem her worthless—make him reject even her friendship.

Was there no more merciful way ? Could she not relinquish this love, and retain his friendship ? No ; her conscience faithfully protested against her weak, womanly vacillation ; to let him know of her suffering would be to awaken suspicion of its necessity — suspicion would end in bringing her father to a disgraceful death !

Hitherto, her agony had been on that father's account ; but now self-pity came uppermost ; pity for her short-lived bliss, for her loneliness, her youth, her exclusion from the paradise love could make, her endurance of Bolton's reproaches, pleadings, and anger. Her strength served her till she carefully cleansed the knife, and hid it away at the bottom of her desk ; when, failing entirely under the prolonged struggle between mind and body, it constrained her to give way to the benumbing influence of complete prostration.

The morning had given place to bright unclouded noon, the shadows had lengthened and faded softly away in twilight. Stillness and death brooded over the weary, panic-stricken household ; the sad tolling of the death-knell and the eternal roar of the ever-flowing waters sounding upwards from the valley, alone broke the dreary

stillness. But the flight of time was unheeded by Constance ; her senses were enveloped in merciful unconsciousness. Horror and suffering had taxed her girl's strength too hardly, and the frail body had lost for a brief space the consciousness of pain and anguish.





CHAPTER XXIII.

SLOW TORTURE.

THE next day, Constance could no longer resist Mrs. Lance's importunities to come down stairs ; with a calmness that astonished her, she was enabled to join the stricken family in the drawing-room, and receive all their kindly greetings—including her father's. Nelly and the widow were alone absent ; they were keeping each other company in the latter's dressing-room ; "Mrs. Gabriel being wonderfully supported under the awful shock."

It was a solemn, miserable gathering. Bolton, who, as a matter of course, took the next seat to Constance, tried to sustain a conversation with Lord Charles and the major ; but his efforts were useless, he himself being the first to subside into silence again. It was too soon for anyone to trust themselves to mention the dead, and their thoughts revolved round him alone.

By-and-bye, the entrance of Bertha's children created a slight diversion, until the boy's innocent inquiry of—

"Why can't Constance talk?" completely upset the squire.

His violent sobs made all the others also break down. The children were hurried away. Mr. Lance left the

room totally unable to suppress his agony, and his wife followed him. The major, under pretence of speaking to little Gay, went next ; and Bertie, with her face pressed against her husband's shoulder, shivered and moaned in the extremity of her first deep grief.

"Constance, darling," said Bolton, regardless of his sister's and Lord Charles's presence, "uncover your face ; turn to me ; it is hard that you should have to suffer so much ; how I wish I had not let you go !"

She looked up at him bending over her, and felt ashamed of her selfishness ; he was believing it genuine regret for his brother's death, and in the midst of his own sorrow, wishing he had borne more to spare her feelings. So she permitted him to take her hand, and stroke her hair ; while, as she tried to call a smile to her wan face, she blamed herself for her weakness and deceit. Lord Charles whispered to his wife, and she, raising her streaming eyes, understood his meaning look towards the young couple. With a murmured excuse about the children, she rose ; and, leaning on his arm, left the room to the lovers.

Constance rose as if to follow them, but Bolton stopped her.

"Stay with me," he urged ; "my misery is less when you are near. I came to your door several times in the night, to make sure you slept." She turned towards him, forgetting she could not tell her secret even in sleep, and was relieved as he added, "The house was so awfully quiet ; I could hear the Strid distinctly, and there was a wretched owl hooting. Darling, I knelt there and prayed to die before you ; I could not bear to think of being left the last ; and then I felt how selfish I was to wish to be spared pain, when one of us must go before the other ; so I prayed again that whenever death takes

either, the remaining one may be strengthened with the hope of meeting to live together for ever in heaven."

The hushed and darkened room with its scented decorations of flowers; his sad, sweet voice; his earnest eyes so unusually mournful; her own inability to speak one word of comfort, and her knowledge of the additional pain she must soon cause him, augmented her anguish. For the first moment, her love and pity triumphed; for a moment she sought his outstretched arms, for a moment her head rested on his breast, for a moment his sad gaze brightened as it met hers, eloquently tender: but the weakness was repressed as soon as shown. ~

At the pressure of his lips, her every nerve quivered; for had not her boasted resolution failed her at the very onset of the road she must tread alone? she broke from his clasping arms, and her look changed to self-reproach and affright.

"What is the matter?" he cried, aghast at her expression. She remained at arm's length, regarding him with remorse. "Constance! you look as if you hate me! Good God, you surely do not blame us for being unconsciously the means of bringing this dumbness upon you."

In his bewilderment, he could imagine no other reason.

She tried to speak, but the attempt was useless; she was powerless, distracted. He approached her, he begged her pardon for his last words, and once more he stretched out his arms, believing she would return to their shelter; but still beholding him with fixed, scared eyes, she moved backwards to the door, opened it and left him.

She could not reach her room unperceived. Nelly stood on the twilight threshold of her sister-in-law's

chamber. Constance had not seen her since the murder, and obeyed her summons with some trepidation; but the first sight of the widow reassured her that that lady did not mean to die of grief just yet, and Miss Nelly's voice was many degrees above unmitigated woe; the meeting was not, therefore, so distressing as it might have been.

Annie was lying on the sofa close to the open window; a Bible and a novel were at her side, and on a small table were the remains of a repast which, from its appearance, had evidently been intended to form part of the marriage breakfast. Grief, we all know, must be fed, and it was natural that the widow's appetite should require tempting. She was engaged in making a list of articles she required for her mourning.

On seeing Constance, she burst into tears, and kissing her affectionately, sobbed out,—

“Oh! is it not awful? I am so thankful he did not take my watch after all: I never could have used it again, could I? Oh! how unlucky I am: the second time, too!”

Nelly poured out a glass of cherry-brandy, and begged her to try a “little more.” Annie motioned her away; but gradually ceasing to lament, at last, as if unconsciously, she took the proffered cordial, and solemnly drank it off.

“Poor dear Nelly,” she exclaimed, as she revived under its influence. “Poor Vyvianne, too! In my own grief, which is of course very much deeper than theirs, I cannot forget their disappointment. I am inured to sorrow, but I am consoled by thinking of the two angels awaiting me above. I shall never marry again, never! Another shock like this would kill me. Ah, me! Wait one moment, Constance. I must not be wrapt up in my

woe. Is there anything else, Nelly, do you recollect? Just read this list over, darling, for it must go by to-night's post: have I been sufficiently explanatory?"

"I will copy it," said Nelly, "she'll never be able to read this pencilled scribble."

"Oh! you dear girl! do: but pray underline the height for the cap crowns. A quarter of a yard from the head to the top; please be very particular, and say I will not have any but from Madame Morte: she has the art of raising the crowns so judiciously. Oh! and, dearest, just add, she need not put bands under the chin; they make one look as if one's jaws were tied up."

"And," said Nelly, "what about your children, are they to be sent for? Papa thinks they will be such comforts for you."

Annie sprang up and replied with sudden energy,—

"No," then sinking back amidst her cushions, she added in a manner more suited to her bereaved state, "No, I will not be selfish; why should I sadden my merry pets by making them witness my grief? let them retain their joyous spirits as long as possible. My precious babies! my own dear darlings!"

"Exactly so," rejoined Helen, glancing at Constance with a gleam of her old sarcasm on her saddened countenance, "then I will tell papa you don't want them."

"Oh, no! Nelly, you wicked girl, make him understand how much I value his thoughtful kindness, and all that sort of thing."

Unconsciously she repeated Gabriel's favourite words, but remembered immediately. Nelly buried her face in her hands, and the three young women cried in concert; his fair kindly features seemed to rise before them, the echo of his calm low voice vibrated on their ears: how little had they appreciated the uniform good temper,

the happy contented disposition, when he was with them; and now his very failings had become virtues, seen through the veil of death. Nelly recovered first; her happiness was but delayed, not laid low for ever.

"Stay here till I go and prepare this for post," she said to Constance, as she left the room.

Mrs. Gabriel helped herself to a little jelly, and then continued her conversation.

"Only fancy!" she exclaimed, "anyone imagining a parcel of brats could console me: of course, I appreciate the intention; *mais, mon Dieu, quelle idée!* I remember after poor Arthur's death I was dressed to receive company (oh! *ma chère*, if you had seen the bewitching festoons of crape!) when *mes pauvres petites* ran into the room, with hands and mouths daubed with ghee—bah! and began pawing my lovely gown. The torture I endured until my friend left, was indescribable. I assure you, I instantly ordered the ayah to leave my service—the wretch! was it not abominable in her to permit the little *cochons* to approach me in that state?"

Constance's astonishment at this novel mourning was interrupted by Mrs. Lance's entrance.

"My dear!" she exclaimed, "Dr. Smith is here, come with me."

"Who—I?" cried the widow.

"No, Constance."

Constance shrank back.

"You must come, my dear; Mr. Lance will be hurt if you refuse to have Dr. Smith's opinion; he has come from York expressly: you will be spared any painful details; we have told him all. Come, my dear love, it will soon be over."

Luckily Dr. Smith was neither imaginative nor deep-sighted. He felt her pulse, stroked her head compas-

sionately, and talked learnedly of the intercostal or sympathetic nerve ; the case was extraordinary, but not altogether unknown, he said. Miss Vyvianne had youth and an excellent constitution in her favour, but her recovery would be a work of time : another shock might effect an immediate cure ; but that, as he naively added, was scarcely desirable. All that he could do was to recommend her to live as quietly and regularly as possible, and to avoid all excitement. Then, turning to Mrs. Lance, he added, "She must be amused without being fatigued, and her mind employed with healthy subjects : it is advisable to let her have her own way in every respect. No doubt when the first painful impression wears off, her nervous system will gain strength ; but time and patience are the only doctors who can assist her to regain her speech." He was very kind, and very unsuspecting of the root of the evil, and Constance rose from the conference as if she had escaped from a great peril.

Meantime further inquiries were instituted : the hue and cry arose throughout the county ; but all was unavailing to discover the perpetrator of the crime ; even suspicion could have no foundation ; Mrs. Gabriel and her husband's private papers could tell of no mysterious enmity. The inquest was held, and the verdict was necessarily, "Wilful murder by some person or persons unknown."

The affair was the talk of the neighbourhood, of England, Scotland, and Ireland, for nine days, and then fresh marvels dimmed its horrors ; but amongst the tenantry and moorsfolk it was treasured up as a standing dish of ghastliness, to enliven long winter evenings round the alehouse fire or the solitary cottage hearth in years to come, and for the benefit of generations yet unborn.

All through the week preceding the funeral, Constance was never suffered to be alone, lest she should brood upon the murder. At night she insisted on having her room to herself; and, remembering Dr. Smith's injunction to avoid thwarting her, they conceded so much. With unselfish tenderness, each member of the family repressed their grief in her presence, and strove to cheer and comfort her. How that week passed she never could bear to remember. The closed shutters, the strange hush, mingled with the scent of flowers, and streaks of sunlight breaking through the shutters; the burst of tears from one or the other, when a word or a look reminded them of the dead; the sickening attempt to eat round the table so sadly thinned of its guests; the faint sobs that broke the stillness of morning and evening prayers; and the awful awakening each day to the recollection of that which had shadowed her life for ever! Yet she bore all, even the pressure of her father's lips and his loving sympathy, without shrinking, and only by her pallid face and trembling step betrayed her sufferings. To Bolton only did she strive to be cold and indifferent: all the week she avoided being alone with him; but he was so fully occupied that perhaps he hardly considered it as done by design. She was with him and Nelly one day, when the latter said abruptly,—

“When did Roger Frampton sail for America?”

Constance took out her Aunt Gittens's letter, and showed her.

“I will tell you why I asked,” continued Nelly: “don't be angry; but when we were all lost in wonder as to—who could have killed him, dear Gabriel! I thought of Roger. I don't know why, for they were never unfriendly; in fact, I believe they never spoke to each other or encountered each other.”

"What do you mean?" cried Bolton; "look how you are frightening Constance!"

"Why, Constance! of course it was an absurd idea: and consider! he must have left England ten days before; but you know he was awfully passionate, and hated me: the thought was but momentary. You are not annoyed, dear?"

To have thrown the terrible burthen even upon her own cousin would have been an inexpressible relief; but, as Nelly quoted Mrs. Gittens's mention of Roger's positive departure, that relief might not be. She wrote,—

"No, I am not vexed; but why did you think he would revenge himself on Gabriel? My father would be the most likely object?"

"Of course," said Nelly; "but you know, dear, one thought of everyone, possible and impossible—one thinks of everything unlikely when there is no clue! I fancied that it might have been a mistake. You know your father and Gabriel dressed alike, and at a little distance even we were sometimes puzzled to identify them."

"What nonsense!" Bolton exclaimed. "Really, Nelly, is such a thing likely? Roger Frampton is a great deal too fond of himself to run such a risk, and because he once admired you, it does not follow that he would chance the gallows for the sake of spiting you. I do not yet despair of getting at the bottom of the mystery: murder will out."

The passionate feeling in his last words froze Constance's blood; her increasing paleness was attributed to her horror at Nelly's words. The latter said, coaxingly,—

"Dear child! I wish I had not spoken—you must forgive me; and even had it been so, it would have made no particle of difference between you and us. We can't

help our relations' wickedness, nor are we answerable for their actions: *I* should not feel lowered by anything a cousin could do. I don't like cousinship; it is neither one thing nor the other: cousins consider themselves privileged to be disagreeably truthful concerning one's failings; but if one wants assistance they calmly remind you, you are *only* a cousin! Male cousins are tolerable as long as they are young and unmarried; but female cousins are worse than step-sisters and mothers-in-law!"

The subject was accordingly dismissed as untenable. Poor Nelly! her spirits were rising again. The removal of the dead to his last resting-place, and the renewal of the usual household business, dispersed the first gloom; but until a month after the funeral no one had courage openly to discuss their future plans. Then, Annie, having appeared down stairs, and exhibited her interesting and becoming garments, began to be anxious to favour a larger circle with a sight of Madame Morte's unmitigated woe as displayed in ravishing crape tucks and "lovely weeds." Her first dead angel's family had treated her shabbily on a former occasion; it would do them good to let them see and know how handsomely the Lances had behaved.

The convenient "pets" were once more brought forward as an excellent excuse for her to go to London, and she, having made the first move, was quickly followed by the Boltons, who had only been waiting for the ice to be broken; it was therefore decided the widow should travel under their protection.

The squire suffered their arrangements; but when Major Vyvianne spoke of going he would not listen. As Gabriel had done, so he clung to the major in his trouble; and, softened by the late events, Major Vyvianne at last consented to remain with the bereaved family for three

months, at the end of which time Nelly was to be quietly bestowed upon him as a reward.

No one imagined that Constance was also forming plans ; nor knew how the constant constraint upon her feelings was becoming greater than she could bear : how every tender word from the people she believed would one day curse her name, was as a stab to her heart. The squire was literally overwhelmed when she and his wife presented themselves before him in his study, and informed him that the girl had accepted her aunt's invitation for the winter, and wished to go with the Boltons and Annie.

"What for?" were his only words of comment.

Mrs. Lance answered,—

"The poor child fancied a change would be beneficial, and she wished to consult the London doctors. Dr. Smith had especially charged them to let her do as she pleased."

"You abetting her, Hannah!" he cried. "Are we not all going to Spireton? Surely there will be change enough, and more care than with those old women at King's Rest. London doctors can do nothing for her."

Mrs. Lance had herself offered all these objections, and more, when Constance had first broached the idea ; but she, good unsuspecting woman, was soon coaxed round, and now firmly believed that Constance's only reasons for leaving them were what she stated. Woman-like, having once espoused a cause, she employed all her energy in furthering it ; but had not expected such determined opposition from her usually quiescent husband.

"I did not expect you would want to leave your old friends in their sore distress," he added, turning to the young lady ; "and what does Bolton say to such a plan?"

On this point the two ladies had already disputed, the elder pleading that, as an engaged woman, Constance had no right to make arrangements without consulting her future husband, while the younger urged that she wished to spare him needless contention, as she had fully made up her mind to go. Mrs. Lance had only given in on recollecting Dr. Smith's injunction ; but the squire con-signed Dr. Smith's opinion to a sultry climate, and with unwonted alacrity summoned his son to their presence.

Bolton looked surprised on entering the room and seeing the awaiting trio ; his father opened the subject at once by saying,—

“ Here's the child tired of us all, and going away at once ; and your mother takes her side : try what you can do, my boy,—I can't understand women.”

But the breach that had been slowly but surely widening day by day between the young people stood in their way now. Bolton was half grieved, half indignant ; he had fancied she would have clung to him in her tribulation, instead of turning away, and although, in obedience to his father, he turned towards her, it was not with the eager familiarity of past days ; and he looked grave and dejected as he exclaimed,—

“ I have no control over her actions, father ! ”

Mrs. Lance interposed.

“ My dear,” she said to her husband, “ you are injudicious, hardly kind to her ; you surely forget how grievously she has been tried, in mind and body. The coast of Dorset is *not* a fitting place for her to spend the cold season in, while at King's Rest she will have a mild climate, complete freedom from hurtful associations, and unrelaxing care and attention. Certainly it is her bounden duty to try, and ours to urge her to try, any and every means to restore her speech and health.”

Constance smiled approval on her zealous advocate, and the squire answered, in a milder tone,—

“I do not forget, I never shall forget, all she has suffered on our account; and, with or without speech and health, she will always be my very dear daughter. You shall go or stay, then, my child, as you like; only promise to return to us with the spring blossoms.”

“One would think you were anxious to get rid of her, mother!” Bolton exclaimed, bitterly.

“What do you mean, Sir?” cried the squire, startled by his manner, so different to his general way of addressing his step-mother.

Mrs. Lance held up her hand, and said, softly,—

“I quite understand him, my dear; he is naturally vexed with me for advocating her absence: but, my dear boy, I tried all my powers of persuasion to keep her here, until she convinced me she was right.”

Her step-son clasped her hand while he begged her pardon humbly and sweetly; but the next moment his eyes fell on Constance standing stiffly aside, and the gloom again gathered on his face. The squire only noticed the apology.

“That’s all right,” he said. “Now I wish to speak a few words to you young people while we four are together. I need not call your father, Constance, as he is aware of my intention; he and I have talked the matter over, and have agreed that your marriage need only be deferred one year, instead of two. Gabriel’s removal has made a great change in your prospects, Bolton; and unless you wish to attain your promotion, there is not the slightest necessity for your going to sea again.”

Bolton looked at Constance; she made no sign.

Mrs. Lance, like a sensible woman of experience, thought the room contained two too many.

She accordingly took her husband's arm, saying,

"That question can be decided afterwards; suppose we leave them to discuss the matter quietly to themselves?"

But Constance pressed close to her as if to accompany her.

"My dear, I must beg you will remain," whispered Mrs. Lance; and, as the girl's hold did not relax, she added, "I cannot understand you and Bolton to-day: surely *you* are not to blame!"

Now was the time for Constance to carry out her scheme of allowing them to consider her base, inconstant, heartless—anything that would loosen her engagement; but she was again too loving, or too weak. She released Mrs. Lance's arm, and allowed her and her husband to leave the room without her.

Bolton remained at the other side of the table, undetermined whether to assume the injured lover's style and demand an explanation, or whether to follow the dictates of his heart, and implore a kind look; while at the same time he hoped and believed she would make the first advances, and volunteer excuses for her late behaviour.

But she sat cold and still, to all appearance, though inwardly she also was a prey to contending feelings; yearning to go to him and chase the unwonted frown from his brow, and restrained by the conviction that such a proceeding would be acting a base deception: one moment resolving to risk everything to retain his love, the next determining to break with him at once and for ever.

He decided matters for her; he could not see that fair young face dejected and miserable, that graceful form drooping, that bright head bowed, without longing to

comfort and cherish her ; so he forgot her averted eyes of the past month, the cold hand that had ceased to return his pressure. "She has suffered much," his kindly nature pleaded ; "she is not yet herself ;" anything rather than she is untrue ; and, his noble heart beating with renewed trust and manly faith, he crossed the space between them.

Mr. Lance went into his wife's dressing-room just before dinner.

"I have been talking to Bolton," he said.

"Well?"

"Well, they have not settled anything so far as I can understand. She is to go to King's Rest, and he wishes to get his ship before he leaves the service. I can't make it out, my dear ; love isn't what it used to be in my time, eh?"

"Did he seem vexed? Did he offer no explanation?"

"None whatever : and I didn't like to question him ; he looked white and melancholy. Have you seen *her* since?"

"No, but it is all right ; no doubt he is disappointed that she will leave us ; that is all, I fancy."

She spoke cheerfully, but looked doubtfully.

"Perhaps so," said the squire : "but I tell you this, Hannah, Bolton let his pipe fall, and it broke, and he kicked the pieces aside without saying a word. I am convinced that he could not suffer the loss of a pipe quietly unless there was something radically amiss ; it is a very bad sign when a man slights his tobacco—a *very* bad sign."

The woods of Bardon were gorgeous with the shifting sheen of their funeral pall of dying verdure, when the carriages which were to convey the travellers to London

drew up to the Hall. Servants and children, luggage and mistresses, jostled each other in the general bustle : no one was unemployed but the squire, and he stood sadly contemplative of the additional vacancies about to be made in his so lately cheerful circle.

The children, delighting in the thought of the journey, were safely stowed with their toys and nurses in the first carriage, and the widow, with her cambric handkerchief pressed to her eyes, was settling her drapery beside Bertha in the second, when Constance came down stairs.

She had bidden her father good-bye with a lingering embrace which had rather surprised him ; leaving him having been her own suggestion. Bolton was the only one left to whom she had yet to say farewell, and he came forward directly she appeared, as if he had been watching and waiting. While the rest were all grouped round the Boltons, he drew her aside and said,—

“ I have not forgotten my promise to you yesterday. I will not annoy you by entreaty, but will trust that when I return from my next voyage, you will have recovered your voice ; then, of course, my promise ceases to be binding : but will you not understand that under any circumstances you are dearer to me than all the world beside ? ”

She shook her head mournfully, and he added,—

“ I shall not leave my father until they are safely settled at Spireton ; you will allow me to come to say good-bye before I leave England ? ”

“ Come, Constance, we are waiting for you ! ”

Bolton stooped and kissed her gravely, and in the rush of agony at their separation her eyes were suffered to meet his in eloquent tender sadness, and her hand to return his parting pressure. His face, brightened with

hope, was the last object on which her tearful eyes rested as the carriage drove away from the gray old house; and then the shadow of the woods, like the shadow on her heart, closed around her, and the noise of the wheels and the rushing waters silenced the last good-byes of those who were left behind.





CHAPTER XXIV

FURTHER SORROW.

MISS SOPHIA could not comprehend now her niece could be dumb without being deaf also ; her intellect being no clearer than when Constance left now some months since. Both the old ladies were glad to have the young one back again, though she could no longer awaken the echoes with her clear notes, nor startle her aunts with her merry sallies.

“Poor thing !” cried Miss Sophia, attentively regarding her the first evening of her arrival at King’s Rest. “She looks half starved ; or else she’s fretting after that young man. I hope he won’t follow her here, for people in love are so troublesome ; beside, those gossips at the palace might think he came after one of us, sister !”

Her words occasioned the first smile that had crossed Constance’s face for many a day ; while Miss Vyvianne exclaimed,—

“Really, Sophia ! I have already told you repeatedly, she can hear every word you say.”

“Nonsense, Miss Vyvianne ! You cannot, can you, my dear ?”

“And,” continued the elder, “you must remember Mrs. Lance wrote us word that the young man will remain at home until he gets appointed to a ship.”

“Can’t he buy a ship any day?”

“Constance wishes the marriage to be postponed till she recovers her speech; is it not so, my dear?”

The latter bowed her head assentingly. How vacillating and insincere she felt herself for having caught at that idea to delay the decided negative which must be given after all!

“Ah, well!” cried Miss Sophia, again oblivious of her niece’s capability of hearing. “I dare say they say so; but mark my words, he’s sure to have some important business to bring him into this neighbourhood before long. I would not thank you for a lover who can stay quietly with his parents while such a pretty girl is in the same hemisphere; but I shall tell Gregory to say we are all out, and not expected home at all, if he does come. And, Miss Vyvianne, we had better not let her go to the Chapel Royal, for girls will be girls, and those idle officers will not attend to their books while she is opposite to them; I remember their disgraceful conduct at the band last year.”

“But, Sophia, this is a different regiment; most of these are married men!”

“And serve them right, too, Miss Vyvianne. However, I shall not throw temptation in their way; she shall go to Kingston Church with me. It would require a very tall, as well as a very impudent man, to peep over our high curtained pew there!”

“How very imprudent!” cried her sister, seriously annoyed. “An engaged woman would scorn to attract attention; all our friends know Constance is engaged; they of course will tell the young officers, and they will consider it a point of honour to avoid coming in her way.”

“Point of honour! Honour has arrived at so very

fine a point in these degenerate days, that it is hardly discernible. I would not trust to the honour of one of them. I know their tricks. They'll jingle their spurs, trail their swords, shake their sabretaches, and clear their throats, until they succeed in catching her eyes, and then they'll arrage their hair to show off their rings, and smirk, and simper, and stare her out of countenance. Honour, indeed! All I can say is, that if they do, I'll tell the clergyman in full congregation!"

"You forget," cried Miss Vyvianne, with proper maidenly dignity, "that it is a young woman's own fault if a man insults her a second time. There are men, to be sure, who cannot discriminate between good and bad, but only fools and madmen would persevere in annoying our niece. Do you not think her deep mourning, and her affliction, will entitle her to consideration and respect?"

She was right in one respect. Constance's beauty, more conspicuous now in comparison with her black garments, coupled with her unnatural silence, occasioned by the mysterious crime she had first discovered, invested her with additional interest, but preserved her from any regard but that of pity. The most impudent man in the garrison eyed her with compassion, and even the scandalmongers of the palace mentioned her with unmitigated admiration. So she settled down quickly into the old routine, but no longer murmured at the monotony, nor yearned to quit its shades: a dangerous life, for the solitude encouraged her morbid thoughts, and the seclusion weakened the healthy taste for life, which her youth must in a more congenial situation have called back. Day by day she fed upon her own sorrow and trial, and no friendly monitor was near to whisper her to find solace in alleviating the cares of those around

her. Day by day she became more wrapt up in her own thoughts, and never remembered the social duties demanding her attention; by the neglect of which she showed contempt of her heavenly Protector.

So mid-winter passed sadly and heavily. Early in the year she received the following announcement of her father's marriage, written by his bride in that young lady's old style:—

“Fancy my impudence in begging Johnny Craven to perform the ceremony! I did not imagine he would; but he did, though; he never claimed a kiss with the rest of my friends. He had had one too many, possibly! I nearly laughed in his face when he solemnly inquired, ‘Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?’ he pronounced ‘this man’ so spitefully. Alas, poor Johnny!

“I went to bid Mrs. Gittens good-bye, and asked how Roger was getting on; but she knew nothing about him, he not having vouchsafed to notice his family since his departure. She is ‘afraid there is no chance of his having been drowned at sea!’—affectionate relative! Your uncle made me a long speech, savouring of the exhortations of ‘Praise God Barebones,’ with allusions to Abraham and Sarah, and a few of the old world worthies; he was cut short by his better half, as usual! Poor old fellow! his eyes filled with tears when he spoke of you. I wanted Bolton to accompany me to see his ‘aunt and uncle elect,’ and he snappishly refused; but I found that he frequently goes and sits with Mr. Gittens—love me, you know, love my dog! I beg the *reverend gentleman's* pardon. Your father also refused a similar invitation.

“Of course, you already know Bolton has received sailing orders. I hope the change will do him good, for he's decidedly better in health than temper. Papa

and *ma belle mère* will be in despair at losing us all at once ; you will have to go and do the dutiful. Annie is abroad. I suspect she has gone to get rid of her caps ; she will pretend they are not to be procured there. The ‘dear pets’ are left in London ; her nerves are not sufficiently recovered to bear ‘their dear little voices’ yet. I believe she had a sneaking fondness for my husband. I have made him confess as much !

“We shall be in town next week, and shall expect you to come and pay your respects. We shall have got over the honeymoon, and will not shock your maidenly propriety by any ‘endearing wiles.’ I suppose Bolton will run up also, to say adieu. I would not be you if he is ‘drownded’ on this voyage, for I verily believe he is only going to pass away the time until you are amiable again : he expects to be absent a year. You must marry him on his return, whether your voice is right or not ; if he likes a silent wife, surely you need not raise an objection. We will teach Johnny Craven the finger language if you are not better : it would be a charming variety to say ‘I will’ in dumb show—such an excellent opportunity for showing off your rings too !

“Never mind my nonsense, child ; I am obliged to give vent to it, for Con is rather ‘crab-sticky,’ as little Gay says. I think we’ve used up all our ideas, and are becoming rather tired of sugar. You may depend upon the honeymoon being a great mistake : one gets tired of admiring show-places, especially in January, and the perpetual moving on gets wearisome. How can a woman smile from morning till night, when she knows the constant packing and unpacking is spoiling her finery ? Then, too, I am half sorry I married a widower, for of course he’s gone through it all before ; and how can I tell what odious comparisons are passing through his mind, while

he is solemnly assuring me—well, I dare say you know what all the men say : base deceivers the whole lot ; fortunately we poor credulous women *can* be even with them occasionally.

“ Good-bye : write as usual, for he is not allowed to see my letters. Good gracious, how astonished he would be at some of them ! I think I must get up a small squabble now, to pass the time till dinner.

“ I am ever

“ Your attached and venerable parent,

“ H. V.”

Almost immediately after this Constance received a letter from Bolton. Just as he was starting for London, he received further orders from the Admiralty to join his ship immediately in Portland Roads ; he wrote hastily and passionately, upbraiding her for her short, unsatisfactory letters, and almost blaming her for occasioning his intended absence from England. His words roused her from her lethargy, and stung her to the quick, and in her compunction she wrote and offered to take Nelly's place at Spireton for the summer. But before that letter could arrive at its destination, she received another note from Bolton, imploring her forgiveness for the first, and in trustful earnest love, bidding her a tender farewell.

Constance spent some time at Spireton, and, among the scenes of her childhood, learned a new lesson—the lesson of self-forgetfulness. Mrs. Lance taught it her unconsciously, as that good woman cheered and consoled the squire, who seemed pining for his children ; she gave up the hours that used to have been spent amongst her poor and her books, to be constantly at his side, encouraging his smiles, soothing away his sorrow, and ever con-

cocting some fresh scheme to beguile him from his own thoughts.

John Gittens's life was also a sermon : his patient endurance, his steadfast pursuance of what he conceived to be the true way ; his never-failing love for his dead sister's memory, came home to her heart. John Craven, too, by his unremitting toil, his kindly, untiring zeal, his earnest striving to engage his whole attention in the care of his parishioners, all served in their several ways to accuse her. What was she about in this great battle of life ? of what use were her unavailing tears and prayers, her kicking against the pricks ? ”

She went back to King's Rest hardly more cheerful, and yet changed for the better ; for she could think of others' cares, and, although she could not express her feelings, both aunts felt that she entered into their pursuits and bestowed greater attention to them than she had done even in her girlhood. Yet there was no real peace in her heart and conscience. Still hanging over her was the fatal secret ; while, approaching nearer and nearer, was the time when Bolton was to return home and claim her for what she never could be—his wife.

But the year of absence expired, and, instead of returning, “Commander” Lance wrote word from the West Indies that the return of the *Espérance* was still uncertain, as she must remain on her present station until the relieving vessel, which was detained by stress of weather, arrived.

This was a respite ; and, with her heart lightened thereby, Constance went to spend a few days with her father and Nelly, who were in London for the season.

Major and Mrs. Vyvianne were not models of domestic bliss, neither did home possess much attraction for them :

each went their own way, but if neither were exactly happy or satisfied with matrimony, they had the good sense to repress their feelings before their friends. A daughter was born to them, but it did not add to their felicity : he had set his heart upon a son, and she was vexed because he showed his disappointment ; so the little creature was kept in its nursery, and only paraded when its mamma wished to act the young mother before her family.

Constance was the only person who was really and conscientiously interested in the child's welfare. On it was laid the same curse as on herself : it was the unconscious sharer of her fate ; but the little one seemed to thrive notwithstanding, and its innocent affection and baby-manifestations of delight when she entered the nursery, went far towards allaying the bitterness of her spirit.

The major was very kind and attentive to his eldest daughter, and her visit passed agreeably. Only once was she painfully reminded of the past.

One morning at breakfast, Nelly asked her husband, as if under a sudden impulse,—

“I always forgot to ask you to give me that little Goojerat knife. You know, you promised it for my writing-table.”

“I know,” he replied ; “I looked for it, but could not find it. When I first missed it—before our marriage—I concluded you had taken possession of it. Confess the truth ! you did ?”

Constance's eyes were fixed on his face, but she read no guilty hesitation thereon.

Nelly was cross (her new morning dress was a misfit.) She indignantly denied the charge, adding, “No doubt he had given it to his friend Annie.”

He, in reply, calmly begged her not to lose her temper,

and then the happy pair, mindful of Constance's presence, subsided into contemptuous silence towards each other ; making their sentiments the more conspicuous by their affectedly merry remarks to Constance, which were intended to show how little either cared for the other's feelings.

Constance was not altogether sorry to return to King's Rest, although the summer was dying, and Mr. and Mrs. Lance were in town with Bertha and Lord Charles. Thus the second anniversary of Gabriel's death passed over, and still Constance's voice remained locked in silence. Bolton now wrote to announce his speedy return. November, with its damp wind, its shrouded scenery, and its long drear evenings, came, and brought back the sad memories of the past.

At this time, it was a relief to her to dwell upon the bygone acts of generations who had inhabited the neighbouring palace ; and many an hour did she spend in the now empty state apartments, peopling them with bygone pageantries and lovely forms, whose painted semblances smiled from the walls. In the portraits of the noble men and beautiful court dames whose gallant deeds and fascinating frailties make of history a glowing romance, she loved to try to trace their ruling passions and virtues. There was one portrait of the famous Colonel St. Leger, which possessed great attraction for her, because she fancied it bore some resemblance to Bolton : perhaps in the bright expression—Bolton's great charm. Whatever it was, it pleased her to contemplate it ; though it hung in the gloomiest side of the palace, where, in winter, the light waned full half an hour earlier than in the other suites of rooms. After visiting this portrait, she would return to the garden side, and, seated in the deep window-

seat, would watch the evening shade gather in the corners, and gradually obscure the beauties that adorned King Charles's Court. The lovely Countess de Grammont—the one pure spirit amongst his polluted set—with her velvet lips, her exquisite hands and serene forehead, faced the solitary visitor, and, being hung nearest the windows, remained the longest visible. Many a time did those calm, sweet eyes impart comfort to Constance ; seeming to speak to her as from the grave, that as she had lived spotless and resignedly amidst the greatest temptations and difficulties, so could Constance rise triumphant above the earthly trials that would draw her down to sin and sorrow.

No sound obtruded upon these reveries : generally none but herself passed through these echoing apartments ; only the clang of some distant door, or the tramp of the sentinel below, spoke of life, and when she left the deserted rooms and passed out into the damp deserted gardens, the earnest eyes of the beautiful countess, and the bright roguish countenance of St. Leger, still hovered before her in her walk home. A dreary walk it was, notwithstanding : the great lime avenue rose bare and quaint with huge bunches of mistletoe like gigantic nests in the leafless branches, the stately trees grimly guarding the many vows that have been whispered beneath their summer foliage, and the many tragedies that have been enacted beneath their midnight shade in the time when strife and crime were necessary illustrations of honour and *esprit*.

One afternoon everything appeared more than usually dull. The river rolling sullenly along reflected no glow from the western sky, though the sun was supposed to be setting ; the voices of bargemen, their forms unseen in the brooding fog, sounded like groans from Hades ; while

the hoarse barking of a dog from the opposite obscured shore might be Cerberus mocking their complaining. The ghostly creaks and shadows of the vast apartments she had just quitted were cheerful compared with the Home Park through which she walked : fallen leaves, wet and sere, strewed her path, and whirled around her ; mist lay thick on the stagnant canal, and enveloped the skeleton oak in which tradition says "Babie Charlie" loved to swing ; the damp dripped from the sodden boughs, falling with a distinctness unnaturally startling. Everything told of death and passing away. One may easily imagine that even the prim drawing-room at King's Rest, although Miss Sophia was its sole occupant, presented a very agreeable change to Constance after such a walk.

The old lady welcomed her appearance flatteringly also.

"That's right," she cried, stirring up the fire into a glorious blaze ; "I was wishing for some one to bear me company. Miss Vyvianne is lying down with a headache. Sit down ; here's the paper just arrived, so I will tell you all the news."

Constance seated herself by the glowing hearth, and her chilled frame rejoiced in the warmth ; while her aunt, having gone through the births, marriages, and deaths, and, expressing her regret that nothing had happened to any of her friends, passed on to the advertisements.

"'Wanted, a governess,' poor thing ! 'to take charge of six children under twelve years old'—which, I wonder, the governess or the children ?—'She will be expected to keep their clothes in repair, and to wash and dress the younger ones, and to impart a sound English education, with the rudiments of French and Latin. Salary, twenty pounds. No Irish nor Puseyite need apply.' Hem ! I wonder if those people will get any answers ? 'Wanted,

a good plain cook in a gentleman's family where a kitchen-maid is kept. Salary, twenty-five pounds.' Well, I'd rather be the cook, eh—my dear? 'Wanted, a gardener without encumbrances. A cottage on the premises. Salary liberal.' Dear me! what nice places there are going a-begging! I'm sure I should not mind being a gardener, I am so fond of early vegetables; but then, of course, I am a woman, so that's impossible. 'Wanted, a respectable unmarried woman to wait on an elderly invalid gentleman.' Well, now, really this *is* a chance; for one could easily inveigle him into matrimony, and be comfortable for life; of course *I* would not act such a wicked and designing part, and perhaps he's snuffy or always choking. However, it convinces me that no one need be unemployed nowadays; it almost makes one discontented with one's independence."

Lost in thought, or rather in dreamy contemplation of the leaping flames, Constance scarcely heard a word of the old lady's mingled reading and comment till, turning to another sheet, Miss Sophia exclaimed, "Awful shipwreck and loss of life!" then she looked up interested.

"Bless me! now I've lost the place; oh, here it is, 'Birth extraordinary!' no, it isn't. 'Cheap funerals on a system of elegant economy—' Now I've got it again—'Awful shipwreck and loss of life!' Just stir the fire, my dear, and let us read it comfortably. 'Awful shipwreck and loss of life!' Ah, I think I read that before, did I not? Well,—'We regret to state that authentic intelligence has been received in confirmation of the rumour that has been some time about of the loss of his Majesty's ship *Espérance*, 84, with her crew; the sole survivor being the cook-boy, a mulatto, who was picked up in a heavy sea by the barque *Liverpool*, on the voyage of the latter for the new colony in Australia. He

states that the *Espérance* foundered in a squall in September last, but he being an uneducated person, and scarcely intelligible in speech, gives but a very garbled account ; there, however, is no doubt that the whole of the ship's crew are lost, timber and effects having been identified as having belonged to the doomed ship. Our country and his Majesty have thus lost one of our noblest and best manned vessels. The commander, Bolton Lance, was one of the most rising men in the service ; he was in the prime of life, and the only surviving son of one of the oldest families in the west of England."

Not until Miss Sophia arrived at that familiar name, had she any idea how terribly the news came home to her hearer.

"What !" she exclaimed, looking up at her niece, who had left her seat, and was eagerly reading over her aunt's shoulder. "What ! the young man ! Oh ! my dear, it is not true. I never believe a word in this paper : I never believe anything I don't see with my own eyes. It is a dull time of year ; they compose all sorts of horrors to make the papers sell. My dear, you don't believe it, do you ?" and the poor old lady rose and grasped her arm, as if she expected her to faint or shriek. But Constance did neither. She took the newspaper quietly, and read the account again, and then sat down on her former seat by the fire, her hands folded on her lap, her eyes fixed on the glowing coals.

He was dead : his grave was, as he had wished, in the deep deep sea ; for ever and for ever the waves would sing his requiem, the seaweed twine round his curly hair, the restless waters rock him in a last long sleep. God was very merciful : He had spared him sorrow and disappointment, He had taken him in his youthful integrity, He had shortened his sojourn in a sin-stained world, to

lengthen his eternity in paradise. She might now cherish his image in her heart, recall his loving words, the happy days of that bright courtship, on which she had not dared to dwell, lest her resolution should be shaken. The moaning of the November wind, the cracking of the fire, and her aunt's occasional "My dear!" were unnoticed; her thoughts were busy with the *happy* past, her ears were listening to the echoes of her dead lover's voice. Again she felt the grave kiss of their last parting; again she sauntered with him through the twilight gardens on those summer nights; again she smelt the sweet odour of the hay-field, and heard the lark's glad carol.

The first moments of her grief were neither given to despair nor regret. Now the veil was drawn aside, his immortal gaze could penetrate the reason of her apparently unreasonable coolness: even now he might be regarding her with approval, loving her the dearer for her self-denial. Better and holier thoughts came also. She pictured a meeting in that other world—a meeting which should reveal them to each other, radiant in sinless beauty; when he would tell her how immortal foresight had enabled him to anticipate their reunion in everlasting bliss, and prevented him grieving for her human sufferings, or pitying her loneliness. God was all merciful: "His will be done."

When in the silent night she lay awake, less happy ideas possessed her: the image of the drowned was no longer calm and beautiful, but, with white face and staring eyeballs, it rose to the top of the crested waves, while cruel sea-birds hovered over those lifeless eyes. The sighing of the wind was as the seething of storm-tossed waters, and the dead leaves flying against her window were as skeleton fingers tapping for admittance. Dread of delirium made her fight against these miserable

delusions. She prayed as in all her life she had never prayed before, and her prayers were accepted. These agonising dreams were replaced by soft memories—of words spoken by Bolton in his grave moods, when they two sauntered behind the rest in the walk home from church—words scarcely noticed then, but remembered now with thankfulness, as significant of the pure nature that was strong in his seemingly careless spirit.

And with these recollections came self-upbraiding : all the shortcomings of her own life arose against her ; neglected opportunities of doing good, disregard of care and kindness shown her, unacknowledged attention, moodily repulsed affection, wilful neglect of all the blessings still surrounding her. She shuddered to think of her unfitness to die, and of the improbability of joining him in that sinless heaven, unless she cleansed her murmuring, unthankful heart. The struggle between good and evil began ; the inward monitor was acknowledged, the tender love that was clearing her way was praised : and this first period of her sore trial was happier than any she had known since Gabriel's untimely ending.





CHAPTER XXV.

AN UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL.

THE greatest trial after the news of the shipwreck, was in meeting Mr. and Mrs. Lance. The latter averted her face when Constance entered her presence. She believed that but for her, Bolton would have remained at home; but the squire felt differently. Her dumbness, her deep mourning, and the betrothal ring, sparkling where her dead lover had placed it, appealed powerfully to his compassion. She recalled those bright days when all his children were around him, and he treated her as a memento of the loved and lost.

“Hannah!” he exclaimed, “can you forget what she was to him, and all we have caused her to suffer?”

Mrs. Lance turned towards them; she could not resist Constance’s appealing look: the momentary aversion vanished, and once more “the child” was all in all to them.

They were sadly broken in health and spirits by this last overwhelming blow, just when they were recovering from the other; and to add to their distress Bertha showed symptoms of consumption, and was ordered to reside abroad.

The squire and his wife turned with loathing from Spireton and Higmoor; they were indifferent to everything

save their remaining children: "Thank God we have three left," said the squire, caressing Constance. It was at length decided that they should accompany the Charles Boltons to Italy, for an indefinite period. They entreated Constance to remain with them; but Constance's new-born sentiments pointed to other duties: the Lances had Bertha and her children; the Misses Vyvianne needed her most.

So they, too, faded from her sight; and, except occasionally visiting her father and Helen, she passed the succeeding months at King's Rest, striving to make up by vigilant care and affection, for the years of undeviating love bestowed by her aunts on her. Ever since Gabriel's murder, she had shrunk from touching the allowance made her by her father, and had kept her expenses within the interest of the sum invested for her by the Misses Vyvianne. In her changed mood, she drew her hitherto disregarded allowance, and bestowed every fraction of it in charity; and in administering to the wants of others, in hearing the trials of the poor around her, in diligently occupying every moment, she found that peace which passeth all understanding.

Still in her dreams other days and scenes came back treacherously fair, or horribly distorted. Once more she trod the desolate valley and stumbled over the bleeding body. She walked in fields of fairest beauty, hand in hand with Bolton, and awakened to feel more woefully her utter desolation. Then the brothers — one with gaping wounds, the other wreathed with slimy plants, and dripping with water — would appear, with gibes and gestures pointing to the fleshless form of her father swinging on a lonely wayside gibbet. Opening her eyes with a start of terror, grief would overpower her, and an agonising yearning

For a touch of the vanished hand,
And a tone of the voice that is still,—

would break down the resignation of weeks.

Home charity occupied her as the second winter drew on. Miss Sophia's mind grew weaker and weaker, and in watchful superintendence of her, and soothing her sister's sorrow, there was little time for selfishness. At last Miss Sophia remained in bed altogether, and one day she placed in her niece's hand the cherished Roman coin.

"I don't think I shall live much longer," she said; "I wish you to keep this for my sake. Miss Vyvianne is a degenerate scion; you I am sure will properly appreciate it. All my life I have meditated writing the history of Imperial Rome during our great ancestor's reign; as people would read it with such interest, if they knew it was by one of the family. Ah, my dear! life is too short for the fulfilment of half our intentions, and I never got beyond the title-page. Oh, Constance, if you only had the nose!" Then her thoughts wandered back to the days of her youth. She spoke to her mother as if she saw her, she called upon dear friends who had died half a century before, and while talking cheerfully to those cherished companions of the past her spirit went to join theirs in their rest. Who can deny that they were not really present to her dying vision? Who can declare that our merciful Creator does not grant us this momentary foretaste of the joys of heaven, to brighten our passage through the valley of the shadow of death?

Her death was a release, and as such was regarded without violent grief; only tender remembrance of what she once was, and regret and awe for the vacant place. For no voice, however harsh, can be silenced—no step, however angry, can be hushed—no form, however unsightly, be withdrawn from a household—without causing

a sense of desolation, a strange blank, a mysterious incompleteness !

Constance had, perhaps, scarcely yet realised Bolton's death. Perhaps she had thought of him as absent only for a time ; but during the first days succeeding her aunt's death, *his* came home more real to her. Nelly declared to Bertha in her next letter, that the girl showed much more affliction over "that old woman," than at the news of Bolton's loss, and appeared as if she was fretting her very life away.

Bertha and Mrs. Lance were nearer the truth when they inferred that Miss Sophia's death had brought back sad remembrances.

"Fancy that dreary King's Rest," cried Bertha. "I wonder if Miss Vyvianne would come to us for a change?"

Mrs. Lance caught at the idea, and wrote accordingly : to her great surprise her invitation was accepted.

Miss Vyvianne saw the change in her niece, and unmindful of her own fatigue and age, decided on undertaking the journey to Tuscany in the early spring.

The illness that had seemed inevitable to Constance vanished under the influence of complete change, and the affectionate welcome she received from all restored the light to her eyes, and the bloom to her cheek.

But the squire was sadly broken : the hope he had cherished against hope, of his boy's return was gradually dying out ; his fair hair was thinned and gray, his eyes sunken and spiritless ; he had mourned deeply over Gabriel's death, but the death of his sailor boy had stricken him down completely. He clung to Constance as much for Bolton's sake as for her own, and, although his peculiar reserve prevented him ever mentioning his youngest son before her, she knew what he was thinking

of as he sat beside her caressing her hand, and she revered him the more.

Bertha was bright and beautiful as ever; all fear of consumption was removed, and they were all to return to England in the summer.

One day, Lord Charles and his wife had gone to visit some friends, and the rest of the party were sitting together, when Major Vyvianne was announced.

"Major Vyvianne!" cried Mrs. Lance.

"Constant!" exclaimed Miss Vyvianne.

"My father!" Constance thought, and with a beating heart she scanned his countenance, fearing she hardly knew what: was his crime detected? had his conscience urged him to confess? was he there to throw his guilty self on Mr. Lance's mercy?

"My dear Vyvianne!" cried the squire, lighting up into some of his old pleasure, "you here! nothing wrong in England, eh? where's Nelly?"

"All right!" cried the major, who certainly was unusually agitated; so much so that his daughter almost dreaded to hear his next words. Ah! the fact is, I had a little business with Lord Charles, so I made it an excuse to have a peep at you all again."

"That was right! now take off your coat. Hannah! ring for some luncheon. Sit down, my dear fellow, sit down!"

"No, thank you, I will just see Charles first."

"You cannot—he won't be home till dinner."

"Then, aunt, will you give me a moment's audience?"

This nervous hesitation, his restless fingers twisting his watch chain impatiently, convinced Miss Vyvianne that something was amiss.

"Come into the next room," she said, and led the way. When they had gone, the squire looked at his wife.

"My dear," he said, hoarsely, "there is more misfortune in store for us. Can Nelly have gone also?"

Mrs. Lance had no words of comfort at hand. That unusual business had brought the major, she had no doubt, and his manner was not indicative of good news. Her husband rose tottering.

"Come," he said, "let us go and ask God to give us strength to bear it, whatever it may be;" and they left the room together, feebly and silently.

And Constance was left alone. Her father's unexpected arrival struck her with dismay; she bowed her head in her clasped hands, and prayed. She pictured herself turned out of this kind home, expelled from the love that was the only bright spot of her existence; and, shrinking from the picture, she prayed to die before the blow fell. No other reason for his appearance presented itself: no fear for Nelly's welfare. If he was suspected, and had come to make his story good, before the Lances heard the worst, what part must she play? If Bolton had been alive, would he have turned against her father? She remembered the lurid light in his eyes that day when he had said, "murder will out." Thus her thoughts turned, as they always did when she was alone, to him, and gradually from the deep shadow of the present her memory recalled the bright past; that chord once struck, it vibrated through her. She had supposed herself reconciled to God's decree; she had declared she would not recall him to life even if she could; and yet, as her self-possession was swept away before the resistless torrent of recollections, her weak and erring nature asserted itself, and the deep yearning that had seemed to have faded away, came back with overpowering force.

With streaming eyes she looked in the large mirror before her, and as she noticed how out of place with the

gilded furniture and gorgeous saloon was her craped dress and woebegone face, self-pity augmented her sorrow. How young she was to have done with all the pleasures of life ! how young she was to sink despairingly in the grave ! Her bodily strength was weakened by the past, her senses were excited by her father's secret errand, and, forgetting the patience and trust which had brought her through so many trials, she craved Heaven to grant her one glimpse of the dead—to let her eyes rest but for one instant on the features so long unseen.

Suddenly, startled by her impious request, she raised her throbbing head ; her cry was heard and answered. There in the large mirror was revealed his form ! not stark and stiff in death, not dank and dripping with a liquid winding-sheet ; but strong and beautiful in renewed strength and manhood. She turned to see him again in palpable flesh ; she moved towards his extended arms ; she heard her name breathed in his thrilling tones ! The sudden rapture relaxed the long-restrained nerves of her throat, and her speech found utterance, as she sank fainting before him.

As she again became conscious, a buzz of many voices and hasty movements seemed around her, but, on opening her eyes, she saw Mrs. Lance only. She started up, but checked the inquiry that rose to her lips ; she must hide the foolish excitement that had conjured up a phantom : she could not bear the thought of being treated as a visionary, weak girl.

"My dear love !" said Mrs. Lance, whose face was a curious mixture of tears and smiles, "you have frightened us amazingly : what made you swoon ?"

"I don't know. Oh ! Mrs. Lance, I can speak !"

Again came a rustling movement from the half-open door, while Mrs. Lance exclaimed,—

"Oh, thank God! thank God! But what caused your fit, love? tell me quickly!"

Trembling from head to foot, with eyes dilating with excitement, Constance suddenly guessed the secret of her father's arrival; she bounded to the door, pulled it wide open, and was clasped in the embrace of Bolton Lance!

"Naught is never in danger? Why did you fear for my safety?" he asked, when, after a great many tumultuous expressions of delight, the reunited family found themselves able to sit quietly together. "That block-head of a cook-boy ought to have been knocked on the head for stringing such a chapter of accidents. I declare when I arrived in London a week ago, I felt inclined to buy a dose of arsenic and inter myself decently immediately, if not sooner, for whenever I met an old friend, an apoplectic fit seemed imminent. Nelly set up a series of piercing shrieks, and when I went down to King's Rest, Gregory gravely informed me that I died under distressing circumstances some months ago, and 'that I'd better not try none of them pranks.' Nelly would not let me come here alone with the major. I believe she had a suspicion that we might both disappear together."

"No," cried Nelly, whose girlish humour was in full play; "I wanted to see Florence: but I will never take charge of a wild man again. You know, Constance, we agreed to send your father on first to break the news, and Bolton and I waited at the end of the street; but one might as well attempt to hold quicksilver as detain that creature against his will: I suppose all his patience was washed out of him, for he vanished before I had time to seize hold of him, and I had to follow in fear and trepidation as well as I could—horrid boy!"

"Really," exclaimed her step-mother, who kept tight

hold of Bolton's hand, "the boy is here, but I can't hear how! Exert your lungs, Bolton; they all talk so fast I cannot get a word in edgeways."

"It is Constance's fault," said Nelly; "she is making up for her long silence. If you are so prodigal of your speech, child, it won't last you to say, 'I will.'"

"The dear child!" said the squire, who did nothing but walk round his son as if he were not yet sure of his identity. "I had forgotten how sweet her voice is; or, perhaps it is like wine, eh, Hannah? better for keeping."

Bolton, who had his eldest nephew on his shoulders, acrobat fashion, and whose legs were violently assailed by two younger children, inquired how his step-mother could expect him to go into the horrors of his shipwreck and sojourn on the desert island just then?

"I mean to make a small fortune," he added, by "admitting select audiences to hear my adventures, which I will intersperse with hornpipes and appropriate songs. Constance shall combine the useful with the ornamental, by standing at the door as decoy-duck to take the money."

When the children were carried off to bed, after entreating their uncle never to get drowned any more, he managed to whisper, unobserved,—

"Constance, you won't deny that you are glad I have come back, will you?" He had asked this at least twenty times since his arrival, but he was never tired of reading the answer in her loving eyes, and on her beautiful brow unshadowed by a cloud. He did not monopolise her; it was enough that he could turn ever and anon and always meet those tender eyes. He felt literally steeped in happiness: those he loved best were around him; and, standing by his father, with his hand on his shoulder, the boyish spirit of absurdity came back

to him. All that was gloomy in the past was put aside by universal consent; his sisters, regardless of their married importance, and Constance, reckless of consequences, entered into his wild humour, and applauded his absurd remarks with the glee of school-girls in holiday time.

"Of course I shall cut the sea," he cried. "Father, I shall stand for Dulton: the old colonel must be worn out by this time. Only think how telling it would be amongst the Dultonians, if I began thus, 'When I was tossed by the waves of the stormy Atlantic, with whales nibbling at my toes, sharks sniffing at my hair, vultures picking at my eyes, and mermaids preparing a coral bed for my bleached bones—what a deuced uncomfortable bed it would be!—I thought of the beloved constituents of my dear native place.' That would raise the price of pocket-handkerchiefs,—make sure of the drapers' votes, I think. Such a glorious lot of speechifying material ought not to be lost. I say, Charley, can't you get up a row in the present government and let us have a dissolution?"

When they rose to bid good-night, Mr. Lance kept Constance's hand, and, when his son came up, transferred it to him.

"Let us have a proper understanding," he said. "Bolton, there is to be no more sea-going; Constance, no more girlish hesitation. We have all passed through sore trials; let us all take a fresh start in life, with God's blessing. Shall we? Vyvianne, you have no objection to this?"

He held the young couple's clasped hands in his.

Where was Constance's determination, rectitude of purpose, self-sacrifice, moral courage, religious duty? Forgotten in the bliss of her lover's presence. She heard her

father pronounce his perfect satisfaction ; she allowed Mr. Lance to call her his dear daughter ; she stood replighted to Bolton in the presence of his family ; and only when she was alone in her room did she become conscious of the insurmountable difficulty still opposed to her happiness





CHAPTER XXVI.

THE CRISIS.

AND during the following weeks—although she knew the preparations for their wedding were rapidly progressing, although she acquiesced in the proposed plans for her future married life—she had not the courage to declare what was, notwithstanding, her unalterable feeling, that she could not link her fate to Bolton's. Once she dared to ask if the ceremony might not be deferred till they returned to England; but everyone negatived that decidedly: the squire said there had been delay enough, and he dreaded another wedding-party amid familiar scenes. Major Vyvianne objected, because he and Nelly wished to extend their travels; and Miss Vyvianne gravely wondered how she could think of raising any obstacles, considering all the circumstances. So, single-handed, with the wish to do right, struggling with the difficulty, Constance, like a deer at bay, saw no outlet to her perplexity: and the time passed swiftly on. Bolton noticed the unevenness of her temper: in company, she would sit silent and uninterested, wrapt in thought; while, when alone with him, she became strangely talkative and giddy, making sport of his tender speeches, or bursting into tears at his serious words, evading *tête-à-têtes*, breaking from his embrace, and keeping as

much as possible with her aunt : but, supposing no harm, he made no comment.

John Gittens wrote to congratulate her on her approaching marriage, thus,—

“There was a long paragraph in last week’s paper about Mr. Bolton Lance’s great presence of mind and admirable conduct when the ship was sinking. The Duke of Clarence, it says, made one of the men who helped to bring the young gentleman to shore, relate the particulars to him. It was, indeed, a noble action, to insist on being the last to leave the ship, and met its reward ; for, you see, the boats all perished, while he—though, as the paper says, he was exposed on a small raft, with two men who had refused to leave him, for two days and nights to the fury of a merciless element, without compass, quadrant, or wrapping—escaped : and a blessing it was that lions and tigers were not on that savage island. It’s our opinion down here that the king will be making him prime minister, or lord high admiral, or something.

“I was speaking to the coast-guard officer the other day, and he says the duke has made him a captain, and presented him with a handsome sword, and called him a gallant officer, who is not only possessed of great nautical skill, and that brave self-possession and firmness so essential in his profession, but who is also an exemplary private character, whose example will be of great service in reforming the present demoralised state of the navy. Your aunt made me copy the exact words, because she says you are sure not to get newspapers in your outlandish parts.

“But we do not congratulate you so much on the good position your marriage will place you in, as on your husband’s noble virtues ; and we must say that, though he might look higher for a wife, as far as rank is concerned,

yet your sense of truth, your candid mind, and your open, excellent heart, are above all rank and riches. Your unblamable life is worthy all you are about to receive ; and we pray God to keep you pure and holy, that you may be truthful and sincere with your husband as before God. Hide nothing from either, and your children will rise up and call you blessed.

“We hope you won’t go to Rome ; we don’t know exactly how far you are off, as we have only a map of the world, and *Firenze* is not marked on it—perhaps it is a new town ? but keep from the Pope, my dear girl, as you would from a vortex. No news from Roger Frampton, yet, though it is nearly three years since he left us.”

Oh ! how these simple words stung her conscience ! And every fresh trait of Bolton’s goodness, every new tribute to his virtue, made her task more difficult. How dare she link his honourable name with hers ? How dare she perpetuate her father’s shame on innocent children ? Her uncle’s blessing brought this possibility forward ; it returned again and again, and wrung her soul with agony. Not on him alone would her inherited curse rest, but on his offspring — on a name that had, hitherto, ranked high for centuries. He might live to loathe his own flesh and blood, for her sake—to hate her for her miserable, cowardly deceit ! She knelt down, but she dared not pray : she dared not ask God to bless her union, and she could not ask Him to strengthen her to throw away the love offered for her acceptance. How unworthy she was of the unlearned old man’s good opinion ! how she envied his religious faith ! how gladly she would become ignorant and vulgar as he was, if she might, by so doing, possess his child-like spirit !

At length she determined to make one more effort to free herself. Bolton was in the saloon, and alone ; but

he had a bad headache, and his hearty delight at her appearance again deterred her from causing him pain, so she only said, in reply to his exultant remark of the closeness of their wedding-day,—

“But our marriage might not be, even now : I might die before to-morrow !”

“Oh !” he exclaimed, “do not jest in that cruel manner.”

“I am not jesting !” she exclaimed, hiding her emotion in a light laugh. “If I do, you will soon get over it, and the ring would do for my successor !”

“Constance ! you are changed : you are never serious for a moment now. You shall not jest on this subject : you know in your heart, no woman could replace your loss. This is no lover’s idle reasoning. When I thought my last hour was come, I prayed not for my own self, but that God would help you to bear the blow ; and now I pray not for worldly honours, but that we may so spend our lives that we may meet again above. Perhaps I have not been grateful enough, and, to punish me, God is turning your love away, darling : it is not so, is it ?”

“No,” she said ; “but suppose—it does no harm to suppose—that I must leave you soon—die, of course I mean ; would you rather I died before or directly after our marriage ?”

“After ; because I should then have a right to grieve for you : but what a disagreeable girl you are !”

“Thank you : how very sentimental you are ! So you would be consoled in appearing as an interesting young widower ?”

“I will not listen to such horrors. In two days I shall be your lord and master, and then I shall lay an interdict upon any topics but those I like.”

She courtesied to him, and laughingly left him.

Nelly appeared next.

"Have you been scolding Constance?" she asked. "I met her just now crying, and without a word to say for herself."

He did not show the surprise he felt, but said quietly,—

"I thought brides elect were always allowed that way of showing their happiness?"

"I did not; besides, she is not addicted to tears: I never saw her cry even when you were reported to be 'down among the dead men,' and Miss Vyvianne held her up as an example of Christian fortitude and resignation."

"Thank you for nothing."

"Well, but seriously, she has never been like herself since Gabriel's death: poor girl, what a shock it must have given her!"

"Nelly, I would give every farthing I have to discover the murderer!"

"Papa has spent above five hundred pounds in vain inquiry. What a mysterious thing it was! If it were not for the shot in the back, I should believe he committed suicide: only why should he?"

"Most unlikely. I shall never be happy till I find it out; I intend to make another attempt yet. I tell you what, Nelly, I'll go over to Harrogate, when I've settled down after our marriage, and I'll hunt out those picnic folks."

"How can you? They will, by this time, be dispersed over the world at large. What makes you take such an idea into your head?"

"It came across me when I was ill on my island; it seems like inspiration: but don't mention it, there's a good girl. I shall not be at liberty till after the *letée*,

week after next, and I don't want to set my father on the subject again; especially as the inquiry will be a work of time. I only wish I had thought of it before I left England."

Nelly might well start back aghast at the bride's appearance, when she entered her room on the wedding morning: black circles were round her eyes; her face was ghastly, and she betrayed no interest in the preparations for her adornment, but let herself be dressed as if she were merely a lay-figure; replying to her sister-in-law elect either in monosyllables, or not replying at all. She acknowledged to having a headache, and a burning thirst; but as she could stand without trembling, Nelly thought nothing was radically wrong.

The fact was, Constance had passed the night on her knees: not in prayer, but as in a stupor: the morning brought no light to her confused senses; she rose mechanically in answer to the first summons at her door, and since then, she moved as if in a dream: a heavy weight on her head, a hot swelling in her throat, a feeling of oppression and utter wretchedness, and no power to shake it off. She allowed her father to lead her into the drawing-room, where, before a temporary altar, stood John Craven waiting to perform the ceremony.

Still, as in a dream, she went through the service, heard the words pronounced that made her a wife, received the congratulations of her friends, and heard on all sides the murmurs of admiration her appearance excited; but throughout, one idea stood forth clear from the chaos of her mind—the firm determination against continuing her deception.

At parting with her father, the earnestness of her em-

brace, and the whispered entreaty to him to continue to love her, rather perplexed the major : there was something beyond nervousness in her manner, too ; but that deep flush in her cheeks, those brilliant eyes, made him lose his momentary apprehension in admiration.

“ Poor child ! ” he murmured, as the carriage drove off, “ she’s certainly very fond of me. Ah ! how her eyes remind me of poor Louey’s ! ”

As the carriage rolled onward, Constance’s distress increased ; they had some thirty miles to drive before arriving at the destination, and every jolt of the wheels made her head throb with pain. The determination she had taken to come to an explanation before they stopped, added to her suffering ; bodily illness was pressing heavily over her, and yet she needed all her self-command and all her woman’s tact to bear her safely through the necessary trial. Clasped in her husband’s arms and hearing his loving words, the difficulty seemed insurmountable : what could she say to lessen the cruel blow she had to inflict ? how act so as to avoid letting him suspect her father’s guilt, and at the same time make him acknowledge the necessity for their living apart ? At every fresh stage of their way, her procrastination made her more diffident, and the afternoon was changing into evening before she could trust herself to speak. Her intended calmness, her set speeches, vanished at the first sound of her own voice, and all she said was, as she withdrew herself from his arms hastily,—

“ Oh ! Bolton, I am not your wife ; I never can be. Oh, love ! hate me, for God’s sake ! ”

“ Constance ! ”

“ Yes, I mean it ; I have been a coward, a wicked traitor : it was so hard to throw away all my happiness. But now I must go : I must not stay. Stop the carriage ! ”

my love ! my husband ! Let me go away ! now, at once !”

“You are ill ! you are dreaming ! Constance, you surely are not jesting ?”

He tried to take her hands ; but she shrank into the farthest corner.

“No,” she cried : “you must listen ; you must believe me : it is not my fault. Oh ! yes, it is ; no one is to blame but me. But you can get a divorce, love : I am not your wife. Oh ! Bolton, you will hate me ! No, love, don’t : pity me, but in mercy do not hate me !”

The incoherency of her words weakened their effect ; he imagined her to be raving, and, under this impression, said, soothingly,—

“Hush ! you don’t know what you say : I will not listen.”

She forced down the fever that was mastering her, and exclaimed,—

“You must listen. I am not beside myself ; though I well might be. I repeat, calmly and distinctly : see I am quite calm now ! I ought to have broken off with you long ago. Under pretence of my dumbness, I postponed its fulfilment ; I was too weak to do more. Then when I heard of your death I was thankful : I thought I might lament you, and prepare for a union in heaven, where all earthly sins would be done away ; but you returned, and again I had not courage to do my duty by you, by everyone. Wait !” she added, as he was about to speak ; “hear me patiently. I have not prayed for weeks : God turned away in abhorrence. I implored his guidance last night ; He disdained to heed me. I have acted a lie in His presence to-day. But I dare not go on sinning. Before Him I vowed to be your wife, and now before Him”—and she raised her eyes to

heaven—"I declare solemnly that I may not keep my vow!"

She stopped, overpowered by the shooting pain in her head. He was compelled to believe her; compelled to admit her saneness. Rapidly returned to him the recollection of her strange behaviour since his return, her forced merriment and her moods of dejection. The only reason he could now think of for her declaration was that in his absence she had given her love to another. Acting on this thought, he cried,—

"I had rather you were mad than perjured. Speak out at once; put an end to this horrible suspense: who has robbed me of your heart, Constance?"

"Do you think I could ever love anyone but you? Do you think—oh! my head is so bad! It is not *my* secret—I—I mean there is no secret—but I don't love you, I hate you. Oh! don't hate *me*!" She clasped her hands on her temples to still the racking agony, and then continued: "I cannot explain any further. Think what you will, but that I am untrue. I would die to save you trouble. See,"—and she removed her hands and smiled at him—"see, I can bear to bid you forget me: it is not very hard to bear, darling. We will go on to England together and avoid all scandal, and then we will say our tempers will not agree. Oh! it will be quite easy: only tell me you will not hate me. Speak, Bolton!"

"Speak! What can I say? You seem to have made your arrangements; but I think I am entitled to some explanation. You declare there is no rival; that your vows cannot bind you to me; that there is no secret; that you dare not give your reasons; that you hate me, and love me. What am I to understand; for one declaration contradicts the other?"

"I don't know," she answered, wearily. "I can't think : don't leave me. Why is the carriage standing still? Ah! perhaps I shall die—that would make all easy."

As he saw her glittering eyes, and felt the burning heat of her forehead and hands, inexpressible relief came : she was evidently delirious ; in a high fever. He called to the servants to urge the postillions on, to reach the next town as rapidly as possible. When he returned to her side, her head drooped on his shoulder, and she made no attempt to speak. On through the twilight country the horses plunged, a wayside cross alone breaking the solitude of the road. Constance startled occasionally, and her bright eyes moved restlessly around. The next half-hour passed sadly enough, and then they arrived at —.

Luckily the country inn was comfortable and clean, kept by an old-fashioned couple, who looked on the best side of human nature, and neither served up venerable goat's flesh peppered into the guise of juvenile kid, nor charged for the miserable *nostrale* as if it were *lachryma Christi*. A sick and unexpected customer was no nuisance to their kindly hearts. The best chamber was hastily prepared, and, all unconsciously, Constance was installed in possession.

By-and-by, arousing under the influence of the perfect quiet, she became conscious of Bolton's presence, and that of her maid ; and when the latter left the room, she said, feebly,—

"I wish to be left quite alone. Will you promise me not to let Anne or anyone sit up with me?"

"You must not be left alone."

"Yes, yes—I—I may be delirious : I may talk nonsense. Indeed I would rather be left quite alone."

"Be content," he said, fearing to excite her more; "no one shall overhear you: try to sleep, my darling."

She closed her eyes and seemed to doze. Bolton dismissed the maid, and prepared to commence his lonely watch. The night was dreary and rough, the rain beat against the rattling casements, and howled through the rambling corridors. He listened to the gradual ceasing of household sounds; he heard the last footstep ascend the wide uncovered stairs. There was no light in the apartment but the wood fire on the hearth, which flickered over the half-unfurnished room, and on the dingy old-fashioned tapestried bed; while in the corners and round the great bay window the shadows condensed in blackest gloom.

Till midnight Constance lay in a stupor, motionless; then she began to mutter, and as the stillness of the interior made the outward violence more distinct, her senses seemed to mingle with the conflicting elements, and her words to colour themselves from the roaring tempest.

As the wind hurled round the house, Bolton was reminded of his shipwreck: the room rocked almost as that sinking ship, the cracking branches were as the parting timbers, the cries of the dying arose with the shrill wind, the dashing of the sea with the rustle of the leaves. As if in accordance with his thoughts, his wife's voice illustrated them. She talked of a stormy sea, of mountainous waves, of a ship in distress; she bemoaned a wave-tossed corpse; she called her dead lover to look down upon her from heaven.

He crept across the creaking boards, and, standing in the shadow of the curtains, looked on her.

Her eyes were wide open—two bright black eyes moving restlessly from side to side; her hands wandered

over the counterpane, while she continued to call Bolton to battle with the sea, to come to her once more.

Stealthily he bent forward and kissed her uneasy hand.

She sat up and looked at him, but without recognising him, and her voice changed to a tone of entreaty.

"Ah!" she whispered, "are you there, father? Oh, wash the stain away! Poor Gabriel! what had he done to you, papa? Why should his life be so shortened—and he loved you so much. Rub it off—rub it again!"

She had hold of the bedclothes, and as she ceased to speak, she rubbed them as if to remove some imaginary spot. Bolton, drawing nearer, listened in intensest agony.

"The sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the third and fourth generation," she presently added. "I am a murderer's child, father. Oh! how could you blight so many lives?" Then throwing her arms up wildly, she cried, "Ah! there is Gabriel! his footsteps leave bloody marks! It is dripping down on me! wipe it away, father, before I go home. Father, I will save you! they shall not hang you. Bolton! for God's sake, be merciful."

She drew aside the curtain, as if aware he was there.

"He shall be saved," he said, hoarsely; "he is safe: we are all safe and happy."

"All safe, and happy," she repeated; "but how did you know? did anyone find the knife in my desk? We will go away, and never trouble you again. You will find a wife more worthy of you. Your children shall not be ashamed of their grandfather."

Then, sinking back, she talked unceasingly; re-enacting her finding the corpse; describing the slippery stones, the little knife caked in gore, the evening light, the murdered man's staring eyes. But ever and anon she cried

out to her husband to love her still ; and through all her wild wandering, her devotion to him was conspicuous.

All through the long night her raving continued ; all through the long night, Bolton stood beside her, trying to soothe her by reassurances of love and protection, and bathing her fevered head.

As morning dawned, the storm gradually abated, but the clouds were dark and lowering ; the raindrops fell monotonously from the carved gable-ends, and chased each other down the blurred window-panes. The cows lowed in the stable beneath, with a moaning sound, and the dying embers on the hearth gave neither light nor heat ; but the watcher felt nothing more than that the chill of dawn was in his heart.

His wife's incoherent words were still consistent : she had exactly pictured his dead brother's position in the valley ; the wound in his breast was just such an one as the Goojerat knife would inflict. Delirious she might be, but method was strong in her madness. Again and again, sitting there in that gloomy morning light, he chased his horrible suspicion away ; but again and again it returned, poisoning his mind with its damning whispers.

The wind dropped into sobbing murmurs, the inn aroused itself from slumber, and its inmates went noisily about their daily work. Constance slept calmly ; her head was cooler, her burning cheeks were paled. Bolton remained at her side, fearful to move, lest he should disturb her ; watching her dishevelled hair flutter in the breath that came evenly from her parted lips, driving away with jealous care the fly that would alight upon her fair hand.

When at length she turned herself and awoke, her eyes met his, serene and tender as of old ; and in that glance Bolton buried the horrid surmises of the past night : be-

lieving them to be but the workings of fever, unworthy a moment's uneasiness, save as the result of illness. But as she recollected how she was then, and why he appeared at her bedside, her face flushed again, and her brow contracted.

"Thank God!" he exclaimed, fervently, kissing her, "you are all right again now, my own."

"Have I been long ill?" she asked: "I don't quite remember."

"No, you were tired last night: don't you recollect we were married yesterday?"

Her countenance changed. "I remember a little," she said; "were you here all last night?"

She eagerly waited for his answer: her eagerness alarmed him.

"Yes, I remained with you; you were very excited."

"Tell me!" she caught his hand, and raised herself to see him better, "did I talk wildly—what did I say?"

"Oh, nothing—a lot of nonsense."

"What did I say? You must tell me: what was it?"

"I will try and remember, by-and-by."

He could not meet her terrified gaze; she threw his hand from her, and relapsed into her former state of unconsciousness.

For a week, she hovered between life and death; every night she raved about murder, strengthening by her circumstantial allusions the conviction that was rapidly depriving Bolton of his peace of mind. He refused to let Anne share his labours; excepting by day, when Constance generally was very quiet: he did not even inform his family of their detention at —.

John Craven, on his road home, happened to recognise the carriage in the inn yard, and finding the young people in such distress, volunteered his companionship; and by

degrees Bolton made him aware of what was distracting him.

The first day on which Constance was able to leave her room, she joined the two gentlemen ; nothing was talked of but the most commonplace subjects, until Bolton assisted her back to her own apartment, when she said,—

“If Mr. Craven really means to go to England to-morrow, let us go also ; I am quite equal to the journey.”

“I think we had better remain, or travel by easier stages, until you are strong again.”

“No, no ; I shall never be strong till this suspense is ended.”

“Suspense !” he repeated, making another effort to put her former declaration down to delirium.

“Bolton,” she said, earnestly, “you must not strive against reality. What I told you on our miserable wedding-day, disjointedly, I now repeat calmly. God has placed a barrier between us. I never can be your wife. Answer me truthfully : In my illness did I accuse anyone of—of murder, of Gabriel’s murder ? Did I talk wildly of anyone ?”

The veins on her temples stood out like cords, and the hot grasp of her hand alarmed him ; yet, with a recklessness that urged him to take any means of solving this fearful mystery, he replied,—

“You accused your father !”

“Oh, God !” she moaned, sinking back in her chair.

“But, Constance,” he added, “you do not suppose the ravings of delirium are ever regarded seriously. Listen ! I told John Craven—you know we always tell him everything, and he and I agreed that in fever it is well known the patient advances most absurd and improbable things, that never had the slightest foundation.”

She roused herself, and answered,—

“I am glad you have spoken to him; he will help us to form our future plans.”

“I will speak plainly, Constance: I will suppose you really believe our marriage should never have taken place; but if your belief is based only on suspicion, it is a duty you owe to more than me, to be positively certain before you ruin *my* happiness—if not your own.”

“I know nothing: I am certain of nothing but this—that we must separate.”

He stood sadly, looking down upon her for a moment; then the greatness of the stake aroused him to exclaim,—

“Let us forget the past: remember whom God hath joined together, no man must put asunder. We will live together unmindful of aught but the future; our pure lives shall atone for the sins of others. Will you have no pity for me? Do you not know that I would gladly sacrifice everything for you?—everything but the great Hereafter. Only call me husband, and never by word, or look, or action, will I recall the shadow that perhaps exists only in your excited imagination. So help me, God!”

She understood his delicacy, his surmises, his loving attempt to spare her further explanation. She knew he had rightly understood her raving: she knew she was at his mercy; but at his hands she feared nothing.

“Do not tempt me,” she cried, imploringly. “You say you would sacrifice all but your hopes of heaven, and yet you tempt me to perjure my own soul for ever. Perhaps God will have pity upon us, and let his light illuminate our darkness: but I dare not do evil that good may come, even for your dear sake.”

He threw himself on his knees before her.

“Constance!” he said, “I guess all that you as a

daughter must try to conceal ; and I still believe you are deceived. Live with me as my friend only, as my sister, and I will claim no dearer title until I have bottomed this foul mystery. I will ——”

“No,” she interrupted breathlessly, “you never can find it out : it is impossible. I was mad, dear Bolton : my words were utterly unfounded. Let me go away ; let me bear all the blame : you are young—you will be happy again. Send John here ; I can talk to him without enduring all this torture.”

He rose, and without a word left her.

“John !” he cried, entering his friend’s room, “go to her ; tell her I would have her even if *her* hands were stained with blood :” he shuddered as he spoke. “I can’t give her up : she is wicked, cruel, selfish ; she has no right to leave me. I wish I had died believing in her. Ah ! I love her better than my salvation.”

He threw himself on the sofa, and buried his face in the cushion, and John Craven stole away.

He went into Constance’s presence, fully determined to speak his mind concerning her conduct plainly : he would reason dispassionately, and argue against her unaccountable suspicion. He had a sincere regard for her—a great affection for Bolton. He had borne his own trials patiently ; he had come out triumphant from the furnace of disappointment ; who so fitted as he to mediate between this disunited pair ? But his high opinion of his mediatorial power was to be lowered. He began by saying almost sternly,—

“I am told you wish to see me : I bring no message from your husband ; he is not in a fit state to think for himself. A third person often sees clearer than an interested person, and as an old friend I think it my duty to expostulate with you. You can hardly be aware how you

are wronging Bolton, independently of the sin you have committed in the sight of God."

"Yes," she replied humbly, "I know and feel all, deeper than you can imagine. It is natural for you, and every friend of his, to be hurt and indignant."

"Perhaps you are not aware," he continued, "that he has the legal right to compel you to remain with him, or to give him plain reasons why you should not?"

"But he will not!" she cried. "Oh, John, don't ask him to do that! You are a minister of God's Word, be merciful; don't condemn me! I tell you I must not marry him; I must not bring a curse upon his children. I cannot explain. How dare you torture me so?"

He saw her fierce grief and pain, and his heart softened.

"Trust me as God's minister," he said kindly, taking her hand; "only be explicit: I may be able to explain away all that seems inexplicable."

For a moment the comfort of pouring forth her agonising fears flashed across her with delight. Then the remembrance of the determination never to part with her secret returned, and deterred her.

"I cannot," she murmured. "I can say nothing. I must bear my burden alone. I expect misapprehension and reproach, as punishment for my weakness. I wanted to see you to ask you to settle with him what we had better do. I wish to part from him as soon as possible: we shall both be better when that first step is taken."

"Can nothing be urged to make you reconsider? Have you properly reflected that you are casting away what may be never again reclaimed—a husband's love?"

"John! you are a coward!" she cried, springing up. "Oh! forgive me!" she added. "Some day—perhaps not until the secrets of all hearts are opened—you will

praise what you now blame. I was wrong ; but now I am right I know. I had to fight against myself, and I failed ; but I *will* be resolute now ! ”

“ I will try to think the best,” he answered. “ It is not for man to judge. You are safe in Bolton’s mercy.”

“ I have done nothing,” he said, on rejoining Bolton.

“ It is very evident that she believes in the major’s guilt. I can give but this advice : let her live apart from you for the present. Time may clear your way.”

Bolton lifted up his haggard face.

“ I will try to bear it,” he said. “ I don’t for a moment allow myself to suspect the major. I will hunt up those picnic people ; that idea seems to comfort me. Go back to her, John ! tell her I am content, if she will bear my name : if she will only see me as a friend sometimes, I will leave her in peace.”

Constance had entered noiselessly as he spoke, and when his head again dropped on his hands, she went forward.

“ We have broached this subject,” she said, softly ; “ let us settle it. I cannot sleep until it is done with. I want to hear you say you have forgiven me.”

He took her hands, and drew her to his side on the couch.

“ You have come to tell me we may be happy ? ” he said. “ We will live together as dear friends, looking forward hopefully ? ”

She shook her head.

“ I have come to ask you to go to England, and attend the *levée* properly, so as to avoid gossip. I will wait here with Anne, for my aunt ; if you will ask her, I think she will receive me again. King’s Rest will be my most fitting place of retreat.”

He kept his eyes fixed on her, but said nothing.

She turned to John.

"He will listen to you," she said. "Tell him I can attend to no other arrangements; urge him to accompany you to-morrow."

"If you must part," said John Craven, "the sooner the better. Bolton, you must be a man: friendship alone cannot exist between you yet: 'wait and hope' must be your motto. Tell her you will do as she wishes—part cheerfully."

Bolton roused himself.

"It shall be so!" he exclaimed. "I will write to my father and Miss Vyvianne to-night. I will smooth the difficulty as much as possible. We will part, love, as for a little time; we will strengthen each other to fight against despair."

Once more his noble nature triumphed over adverse circumstances, and rose above disappointment. "See how strong I am," he continued, turning to his wife: "we will say good-bye and *au revoir*."

She clasped him in her arms; she let her hands stray through his bright curls: his enforced calmness called forth all her passionate sorrow. He kissed her eyes, her cheeks, her lips, her clasping arms.

"God have mercy upon me!" was his only reproach.

She rose to leave him; but returning before she reached the door, she pressed her lips fondly, lingeringly, to his brow: she could not trust herself to speak.

"Repent!" he cried, misinterpreting her hesitation. "Stay with me, my love! my life!"

But she hurried away from that appealing voice, although echoed even by her own heart—from those yearning eyes suffused with unmanly moisture. The bitterness of death was surely lighter than this soul-piercing anguish.



CHAPTER XXVII.

AN OLD NEWSPAPER.

AS may be supposed, this inexplicable separation caused the utmost consternation in the two families. Nelly charitably concluded, "Oh, of course Constance is mad! Think of Miss Sophia's state. No doubt insanity is in the family. I begin to fear for my baby; she was quite rabid over her teeth." But this opinion was carefully kept from her husband. The major, as well as Mr. and Mrs. Lance, turned completely against Constance; they would not hear her name mentioned. Bolton might talk as he liked, they would never believe he was to blame. Major Vyvianne cursed his early marriage, and resolved to bring up his second daughter so as to compensate him for her unmanageable sister. Only Bertha and Lord Charles gave the unhappy girl credit for acting conscientiously; and to them only could Bolton speak openly. Miss Vyvianne acted against her will when Bolton induced her to receive her niece again; but very soon the sad, sweet face, and the meek affectionate spirit triumphed over the old lady's anger, and though she could not praise, neither could she blame. "It is an ill wind that blows nobody good," she argued. "Bolton has lost his wife, but I have gained a daughter in my old age."

Bolton lost no time in making inquiries at Harrogate, and, after protracted troubles and disappointments, he succeeded in procuring some old arrival lists for the year of his brother's murder ; but there was a gap in them : those for the weeks before and succeeding the crime were not procurable. There was no name in any of the others on which suspicion could rest. The hotel-keepers could not help him. "Picnics to Bolton Abbey of course they all recollected ; but what people formed them they really could not remember : they all remembered a murder, too, but beyond the mere facts they knew nothing. Harrogate was always full at that time of year, everyone had plenty to do without thinking of news."

So, weary and desponding, he was obliged to leave, with his hopes baffled, though not destroyed ; there yet remained a chance of the missing papers or lists turning up. He wrote to Constance after this attempt, telling her he would not yet despair, and entreating her to let him see her occasionally. She would not grant his request : she would correspond with him at stated intervals, but an interview would only be protracting and increasing their sorrow ; and John Craven said she thought wisely and well.

Disappointed in his hopes of seeing his son's sons, Mr. Lance tried to induce Bolton to accept Constance's offer and procure a divorce. His first hint at such a thing roused the young man's anger.

"I would sooner part with my life," he cried, determinately. "She will yet be mine. I feel it : I know it !"

"It is a fine property," said the old squire, wistfully. "Our name has never ceased for eighteen generations. If *you* are in the wrong, then you ought to release her ; if she, she has no right to blast your life. You must bear with me, my boy. It grieves me to see your bright

face clouded : I never hear your whistle, I never see you step out briskly ; you are wearing away. I can't outlive you, my son !”

“ I promised not to tempt the sea again, father, and I'm not fit for land sports ; let me have a yacht : we'll go off somewhere together, you and I, for a cruise.”

And for his father's sake, Bolton professed great interest in yachting. The squire accompanied him two or three times ; but he was happiest with his Hannah and his grandchildren.

One autumn Bolton had to put in to an obscure town in Norway, his boat having sustained some damage ; the only habitable house was the clergyman's, and he hospitably insisted upon the stranger becoming his guest while the necessary repairs were made. It was a pleasant family in which Bolton found himself domesticated, and both his host and hostess spoke good English. The husband had been educated in Germany, the wife had had an English mother, and proudly exhibited that mother's scanty library of English works ; she had also some English newspapers : “ perhaps her visitor would like to see them ? they were but nine or ten years old ! that is, the latest, some were fifty ! ”

With little interest he unrolled the discoloured papers ; they did not contain even London news, only north-country weekly details of local gatherings, accidents, and markets. The old lady had evidently been his own countrywoman, a Yorkshire lassie, who had forsaken her native land to follow the fortunes of a Norwegian skipper, and had kept up her interest in her ancient neighbours by means of these newspapers. He turned them over, half-amused, half-wearied, until, under the heading of “ Harrogate,” he came upon “ a list of arrivals for the week

ending——.” With interest strongly aroused, he hastily searched for that date which had eluded him so completely during his visit to the place itself. It was here. “Arrivals at the Dragon, at the Queen, at the Crown, at the White Hart.” At the latter appeared the name of Roger Frampton, Esq. !

With blazing eyes, with bounding heart, with hope and joy, and ardour, he pressed the precious tale-teller to his lips.

Life and love were at his command : he guessed it all ; he saw it all already ! Roger had not sailed when his family believed he had. Why should he mislead them, unless for some great purpose ? It was so : it must be so : it should be so ! He conned over the next paper : again was the same announcement ; thrice, but no oftener. God had piloted his vessel to this outlandish place ! He showed his thankfulness by his bountiful liberality to the whole community. He left, followed by the blessings and good wishes of the entire population. He landed in England to receive news of his father’s having had a paralytic stroke !

Filial love overcame all other considerations ; for weeks he remained at the squire’s side ; for months he supported his stricken steps, and not until he was again able, though very tottering and feebly, to leave the house, did Bolton obey the impulse of his heart. He said not a word of his discovery to Constance ; he had learnt to write very calmly to her ; or, as he knew by experience, he would receive no answer. He did not even tell his dearest friend, John Craven ; but he went down to Harrogate privately, and made it worth the while of the master of the White Hart, and his myrmidons, to rack their memory concerning their red-headed customer, Roger Frampton, Esq.

A waiter was the only one who could really recollect him, and he had no agreeable reminiscence.

"He had spilt some melted butter, at dinner, over the gentleman's coat, and had received such terrible abuse in consequence, that the circumstance had fixed itself. Yes, he knew that gentleman had made one of a picnic party somewheres : where he couldn't say : he had offered to carry his great coat to the carriage, and had been sworn at again for his officiousness."

The next step seemed more difficult—that was to learn from the Framptons, without alarming them, the son's present whereabouts. John Craven's assistance was now required, and he interrogated the family ; but Roger had never been heard of since he left home.

Here was a sudden and apparently insurmountable check !

But Bolton was not daunted : he discovered in Liverpool by what ship Roger had eventually sailed for America, and at what port he had landed, and he resolved himself to follow him. But again a summons from home defeated his plans. The squire was again attacked, and this time without the slightest chance of recovery.

He lay dying at his son-in-law's house in London, surrounded by all who loved him—excepting the outcast Constance. Unconscious and apparently lifeless, he lay ; knowing none : not even his faithful wife, not even his darling son. The latter never left him, and when Mrs. Lance, utterly worn out, was forced to get some rest in another room, he remained unwearied.

One evening when he was the only watcher, Bertha entered, softly followed by Constance. The latter had craved to bid a last good-bye to him who once returned her love so truly ; and while the rest of the family were at dinner, Bertha had planned to gratify her desire.

Like a guilty creature, she thus entered the house and stealthily looked her last on her offended father-in-law.

Bolton had never seen her since their parting, directly after their marriage. The presence of death prevented any demonstrative greeting now. Across the stricken, senseless form, they looked at each other, and marked Time's altering hand on each. The freshness of youth had forsaken both ; but sorrow had refined, not marred, their beauty. Constance stooped and kissed the sunken features that showed no consciousness, and then turned to leave the room. She dared not remain longer.

Bolton opened the door for her to pass out. She gave him her hand, and—after a moment's hesitation, held up her face. Silently and gravely they embraced ; her tears remained on his hand. She passed out, and he returned to his post of watching by the dying.

When death gathered the old squire to his fathers, Bolton set sail for America. Constance, in her turn, soothed her aunt's dying pillow.





CHAPTER XXVIII.

CONFESSION.

ON her fortieth birthday, the mistress of King's Rest sat alone musing on the past. Sad and solitary her life had been for five long years. Miss Vyvianne had gone, and Constance had lived at the old house, more quietly and monotonously than ever.

For two of these five years, John Gittens had found comfort in this aristocratic mansion ; for Hester Jane had died, and Spireton seemed so lonely when her tongue was silenced in the grave, that he had accepted his niece's invitation, and never left her again until he was carried out to his last home. The poor old Methodist minister was amply repaid for the love he had lavished on the forlorn little stranger, by her tender care of him in his last years, and he died calling on God to bless her and reward her. He alone of all her friends never troubled her ; never sought to fathom the mystery that blasted her happiness. His little sister's child could do no wrong, in his ideas. His dying words fell like an augur of good on her sorrowing heart : " At evening time there shall be light." And when the shadow of death darkened his homely features she felt utterly forsaken.

Sitting alone—a solitary middle-aged woman, a widowed wife—the musings of Constance must needs be sorrowful. Floating around her were loved faces she might never see in life again—voices whose tones vibrated only on her faithful memory. She seldom permitted her thoughts to stray from the present, and persuaded herself that the passions of her youth were uprooted ; but the depths of her heart once stirred, the memories of the past once loosened, overturned the self-control of years ; and once more she was an impetuous girl, a prey to the fierce storms of pent-up grief and pain.

Was this weak passion the result of eighteen years of striving against her ingratitude and murmuring ?

She knelt down abased and penitent, and wrestled with her faithless spirit. Could she not watch one hour ? Could she not lay her burden at the foot of the cross ? Gradually her yearning cry was answered ; peace returned to her breast, and she rose from her knees a conqueror over herself. Not that the stain that ever coloured her feelings was effaced ; Time was powerless to diminish that agony ; but God had softened it by giving her His strength to bear her trials with resignation, and to contemplate, without emotion, a sad old age and an uncared-for death-bed. The old leaven would struggle with her better nature sometimes—too often successfully ; but she could feel herself drifting nearer and nearer to that lock which sinks or rises with its immortal barque, but never re-opens its floodgates,—and yet look forward with faith.

Here Gregory, bowed and wrinkled with age, announced Lady Bardon and Mrs. Vyvianne, Bertha and Nelly.

“ *I would* come,” cried the latter, “ though your father declared I shouldn’t. Good gracious me ! how well you wear,”—and turning to a mirror she compared her own

worn and faded countenance with the calm smooth features of Constance. "I remembered it was your birthday, so I sent to ask Bertie to bring me with her to see you. Con nearly danced with fury at my daring to disobey his wishes; but I don't care what he says now!"

There was a recklessness in her tone that pained one to hear; her misspent youth had brought a disappointed middle age; her gay dress only made more perceptible her fading beauty. She lived for the world, and the world laughed at her; her husband despised her; her child feared her. She had misused nature's fairest gifts, and nature in revenge had robbed her of them.

Constance turned to gladden her saddened eyes with a gleam of Bertie's still beautiful face, yet untouched by care, yet beaming with unalloyed content. Her pure soul spoke out of those serene eyes, her glad heart sparkled in their cheerful depths.

"Never mind Nelly," she said, answering Constance's grieved look; "she is down deep in despair one hour, and up at the highest pinnacle of delight the next. She wants us to pity her, and when we do, she turns upon us, and asks how we dare to insult her: is it not so, Helen?"

"I don't know," she said, arranging her thinned ringlets; "but I think, had I married poor Johnny, I should have made a better woman. Heigh-ho!"

"No, you would not; you would never have ceased regretting you had buried yourself alive in a country parsonage: you are always wishing to be something different to what you are, instead of making the best of your present position."

"Do cease sermonising, Bertie. Oh, Constance, how can you exist in this old-world house? Let me look at

you, child; it is at least a century since I saw you; your father will want to know exactly how you look. I dare say he is calculating his chance of coming in for your property. Oh! what a wretch I am! But the old lady ought to have left us this place; it would have suited us so nicely for *fêtes*. Upon my word, you and Bolton are the most foolish people I know—both at daggers-drawing about the Lord knows what; he wasting his prime in backwoods, you hiding your beauty in this wilderness.”

“How is my sister?”

“Oh, becoming a miracle of learning. I am quite a secondary person now. Of course she is to marry a duke. I consider her very ordinary looking, but Con declares she is wonderfully handsome!”

“I am going down to Spireton to-morrow,” said Bertha, “with Mrs. Lance, my Gay, and his lady-love. We heard from your husband this morning.”

“Well!” cried Constance, her heart fast beating at the words “your husband.”

“Well! he is coming home almost immediately, and will sail direct to Spireton. What can he have been about in America? It is three years since he went there.”

Constance could have told her what forlorn hope took him into that vast country, without a clue to guide him; but she said nothing.

For the hundredth time both sisters tried to read in Constance’s sad face the secret that clouded her life; but there was no light.

“Oh!” cried Nelly, “I dare say he has a wife out there; I hinted as much to John Craven the last time I saw him, but he was so scandalised. What a thorough old bachelor that creature is, to be sure!”

As the visitors rose to depart, Bertha said aside to Constance,—

“Can I not prevail on you to welcome him home? He writes more gloomily than ever.”

Constance shook her head, and when they had gone she thought over Bertha’s words: “he writes more gloomily than ever;” that accounted for his silence to her.

His last hope, no doubt, was ended; all his efforts could not fasten the crime of Gabriel’s death on another than her father.

She took out his letters; those guarded epistles that for many years had been their only connecting link; every word was written in her heart; but she loved to scan the careless characters: to see the commencing words, “My dear wife,” that had been traced by his dear hand. She showered kisses on those discoloured pages, and blessed the writer, whose faithful affection had withstood coldness and repulse for so many years. In some of them he exulted in the prospect of claiming her as his own, freed from the shackles of an unfounded suspicion; others were less cheerful, less hopeful, and a few were utterly desponding.

Since his departure for America, Bolton’s letters had been very few and far between, on account of the difficulty of transmission; and for the last eight months she had not received one line. Neither had Mr. Craven given her any intelligence; perhaps he, too, considered his wanderings futile and chimerical. Oh! how she longed to be able to fly down to Spireton to greet him as her heart prompted; to make up for the unkind past, to be his faithful companion till death!

Blaming herself again for her repining, she locked away the precious letters, and busied herself in active

charity : which now, as often before, eased her spirit of its bitterness.

Two days afterwards she received the following :—

“MY DEAR FRIEND,—

“Roger Frampton returned here unexpectedly three weeks since. He is now dying, and desires earnestly to see you. Come without delay. God has at last heard and answered our prayers. May He give you strength to bear your happiness, as well as you have endured your misery ! My carriage shall meet you at Dulton station by the first train to-morrow.

“I am faithfully yours,

“JOHN CRAVEN.”

She dare not trust herself to probe the full meaning of this summons ; she dare only pray for help to keep her humble ; but as she again beheld the scenes of her youth, the ardour and hope of youth returned. Yet the familiar town was altered ; new names were on the smart large windowed shops, new faces peeped over the blinds, to see what brought Mr. Craven's carriage in at so early an hour. A smart new omnibus stood at the Lion, gas-lamps guarded the benighted pedestrian from the open drains that still, notwithstanding the progress of all beside, made darkness perilous, and offended the olfactory organs. Only the wide heath and the pure air were unchanged ; and as the carriage bore her over the nill, within view of the village in the valley and the sparkling sea beyond, time seemed to have stood still, and she to be once more beginning her life.

She drove straight to the farm, where Mr. Craven was waiting to receive her, and while he went up stairs to prepare the sick man, she remained in the now silent kitchen.

The young girls who had flaunted their finery in humble imitation of "Miss Nelly at the Manor" had become wives and mothers in distant places. Mrs. Frampton slept in the little chapel yard, and the old farmer, propped up by pillows in the elbow chair by the fire, was the only inmate of the once noisy house. She went to him, and tried to make him understand who she was ; but the attempt was useless ; only when she mentioned his son, his bleared eyes lighted up, and his blue lips moved.

"Ah !" he said, quaveringly, "they've all gone and left me to die alone ; they're an ungrateful lot ! I slaved and toiled to buy them fine things, and this is how they serve me ! Hark !" he added, trying to rise, as the sound of Roger's groans reached him, "that's my son ! my fine gentleman son ! Oh Lord ! I made an idol of him. I fooled his bent to the utmost ; I refused the rights of the poor to foster his evil, spendthrift ways. It's all come home to me now. I'm left in my old age. Oh Lord ! oh Lord !"

A fit of coughing deprived him of speech, and he sank back exhausted. John Craven appeared in the open doorway, and beckoned to her.

They stood together in the porch, sheltered from the noonday sun, while he explained how Roger came to be there.

"One day," he said, "while I was paying my usual visit to old Frampton, a miserable object came up to the door. The old man recognised Roger the minute he spoke ; but I should never have known him : he was shoeless, hatless, worn to a skeleton, and clothed in sheer rags. There was a violent scene between them : the father was angry, and the son callous ; the contention ended in Roger falling into an epileptic fit. In that condition it was impossible to turn him out, so he was put to bed,

from whence he has never arisen. I really believe he was grateful to me, when he regained his senses, for being instrumental in persuading his father to keep him; but when I told him that the doctor declared he was dying, he went into the most fearful paroxysm I ever witnessed. I strove hard with him to make his peace with God, but, had it not been for a word he let slip in his madness, I should not have succeeded in making him confess his sins—that confession you must hear from his own lips. I pray God that he may not die until he has made the sole reparation in his power.”

Constance stood at her dying cousin’s side. He knew her in an instant, and, shrinking to the farthest side of the bed, he held up a bony hand, and shrieked to John Craven to take her away.

“Remember,” said the rector, calmly, “remember the years of suffering you have caused her! remember that your hope of pardon depends on your sincere repentance.”

“Roger,” said Constance, “I will not blame you: I forgive you all and everything; only speak truthfully and at once.”

“Betsy Jane,” he cried, his mood suddenly changing at the sound of her voice, “poor Betsy Jane! Ah! ah! do you remember the pigsty, Miss Constance Sophia Vyvianne? What am I to say? I forget. My head is full of blood. See! his eyes are wide open; shut them, cousin. Ah! it is not the right person! it is the young squire. See, cousin! his head is red—as red as mine—but it is all red with blood!”

Shuddering from head to foot, Constance clung to the bed-post for support. Roger rolled and writhed in madness, shouting at intervals,—

“Constance! I want Constance! Ah, Miss Constance,

where are your pink cheeks and long curls? All gone! Shut your eyes, you foul fiend! I'm not a murderer! I only wanted to wing the major, not to kill the young fool of a captain. Ah! poor young fool, you mustn't live to tell tales! Mr. Craven! Mr. Craven! save me, help me—keep those devils away!”

John Craven, by main force, controlled his struggling limbs, and recited some soothing texts of Scripture. In a few moments, the paroxysm left him quiet and exhausted; and then he went on more collectedly,—

“I know you now,” he said, looking at his cousin; “you're sobered down, cousin: we're neither of us in the humour for spiting each other now, are we? But you are devilish handsome yet, while I—look at me, am *I* handsome?”

He bared his fleshless arms, and showed them, tattooed with strange characters.

“Look,” he said, “these pretty marks made me a son-in-law of the great Maori chief. I never stayed in America, not I: I wasn't such a fool as to do that. I've hunted with the New Zealanders, fished with the squaws, and starved with them in the bush; but night and day, in sunshine and storm, blow hot blow cold, I felt the blood spurt out on my hand as when I thrust the major's knife I picked up at Spireton into young Lance's breast.” He stopped as he saw the horror of his cousin's face, and added, “Promise me, first, to let me die here! promise me, by your own hope of mercy, to save me from a disgraceful death on the gibbet. I am your mother's nephew; for her sake, for the sake of my old father, promise me, or I'll not say another word.”

“I promise.”

He turned to John Craven.

“Tell me what you said when I was first taken bad.”

"There is joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth."

"Now call my aunt."

An old maiden sister of the farmer's came from an inner chamber, and took her place in sight of her nephew. He raised himself, and clearly and rapidly continued,—

"You all hear me in a sound mind for the time, declare myself a murderer. I hated my Uncle Vyvianne : never mind why—he stood in my way. I swore to revenge myself. I couldn't do it here ; I waited till he went after his friends in Yorkshire : then I left home under the pretence of sailing at once for America. I did go to Liverpool, and then I hid until the vessel in which I professed to be going set sail ; then I went to Harrogate : I had admirers there—at least my *money* had—I joined picnics, and dances, and excursions. Ah, ah ! I passed for a jolly good fellow there.

"One day we went, a large party, to Bolton Abbey. I knew who lived near there : I managed to slip away unperceived ; I carried a pistol, and a little knife that the major once lost in the fields ; I tracked my supposed enemy to a lonely place ; I shot him from behind, and not until he turned in his agony did I see my mistake. The devil had disguised him to outwit me : he sold me, but he didn't desert me after all ; he gave me one more, one hellish idea. I had sharpened the knife ; I finished my work, and I left the knife, hoping its presence would blacken my hated uncle's character. It was bloody work, and I would not have harmed a hair of that young fellow's head : I bore him no ill-will. When I rejoined my friends they had not noticed my absence, and I stayed on at Harrogate for a week afterwards. We used to wonder and speculate upon the mysterious murder. I often longed to declare myself when they were all talking about it at

dinner ; but I dare say they wouldn't have believed me. Directly I heard cousin had been the first to find the body, I guessed she had picked up the knife and hidden it—was it so ?”

She sank on her knees, crying reproachfully, while tears rained down her cheeks,—

“Oh, Roger ! God have pity on your soul ! but you had none on me !”

Her agonised sobs deprived him of all self-control.

“Take her away,” he shrieked. “Parson, you promised me peace ; but they won't let me have it. There's young Lance praying against me ; there's God hiding his face ; there's Satan coming for me. I won't die : I won't go.”

The scene that followed baffles description. In its midst, the old man, drawn by his son's fearful yells, dragged his feeble limbs up stairs, and reached the chamber of the dying ; but there, the unwonted exertion, combined with the spectacle before him, overcame him entirely, and he fell heavily to the floor—dead ! Roger was himself in an instant ; he flung off the restraining hands that would have held him back, sprang up, and, with supernatural strength, raised the old man's body, and carried it reverently to the bed. That done, reason and strength deserted him, and alternately cursing himself and calling upon his father, the great change came, and the guilty body resigned the guiltier spirit to hear its eternal doom.



CHAPTER XXIX.

AT EVENTIDE THERE IS LIGHT.

SCARCELY knowing how she contrived to get there, Constance found herself in the window-seat of the parlour down stairs. How familiar was the sanded floor, the china facing on the high chimney-piece, the wide fire-place filled with hawthorn, the framed samplers on the yellow-washed walls ; the corner cupboard, with its open door, displaying the best tea-service and silver spoons ; the chest of drawers doing double duty as a side-table, and the repository of the best linen, and the tall gillyflowers peeping in at the open window ! She was alone—all the rest were up stairs. John Craven was comforting the poor old sister and the terrified servants, who had flocked in to look on the melancholy sight. But Constance heeded no one : her tumultuous thoughts had carried her away from the fearful past, from the mournful present, to the earthly future, which for so many years she had not dared to consider. Might she at last return her husband's love ? Might she, after all, be here to welcome him home ? Was it ordained for her to dispel all doubts, to repay him for his weary wanderings ? She clasped her hands in ecstasy, and then reproached herself for her gladness, remembering her cousin's awful end.

John Craven presently came to her.

"You must come home with me," he said, "and have rest and refreshment : or will you go direct to the Manor ?"

"I would rather go to your sister," she replied : "but will you add to all your kindness by explaining my conduct to Mrs. Lance ? I should prefer not going there till Bolton takes me : when do you expect him ?"

"They are all spending the day at Spireton Castle ; Bolton's arrival is of course uncertain."

"Mr. Craven," she said, after they had walked on silently for a few moments, "I want you to tell me sincerely, if you think I acted right ?"

"It is a very difficult question. I have considered it greatly, even before I knew you had picked up that knife. Still, I can't help thinking that you were too inexperienced and self-reliant to be so certain of your father's guilt. Perhaps it would have been better if you had openly confessed to *him* :—how easily he could have satisfied you."

"But even had he murdered Gabriel, he would have denied it," she said, faintly. "I was incapable of speaking, too ; how could I write such a charge ?"

"I cannot judge," he exclaimed ; "but I fear there was a want of faith. I do not wish to fill your mind with doubts now : I sincerely believe all has been for the best. How can we tell what both you and Bolton might have become, had not trial purified your spirits ? Be comforted in thinking that all these years have been securing your everlasting happiness. You have not sat down desponding. Many a heart has been lightened, many a family rescued from ruin of both soul and body by your kindly help : while your husband, although he himself was absent from his estates, provided honest

agents to care for his people, and has made immense improvements both here and in Yorkshire. I do not think there will be one dissenting voice in the universal rejoicing over your reunion."

Her tears were falling fast; but they were of happiness, and her first impulse when alone was to pray that prosperity might not harden their hearts, or turn away their eyes from that merciful God who had brought them safely through the waters of bitterness. How sweet it was to couple her husband's name with her own: to pray for him as part of herself.

John Craven and his sister lived in the Hall now; and if Nelly could have witnessed how well-appointed was his bachelor establishment, how revered and loved was the "rural dean," and how many Dorsetshire belles would have willingly accepted his "middle-aged" affections, she would have sincerely regretted her short-sighted rejection of his circumscribed rectory: but the Reverend John died unmarried. He lived only to do good; and the only blamable part of his life was, when he suffered his affections to be entangled in Miss Lance's unworthy fascinations.

Calmed and refreshed by a few hours' repose, Constance prepared herself for an evening stroll on her favourite cliffs. Mr. Craven was in the meantime to visit the Manor, so as to be ready to receive the ladies on their return, and then to join her and relate the result of his explanation. As she smoothed her hair before the glass, Roger's words returned, "You are handsome yet." There was no vanity in her self-complacent survey of her yet unfaded countenance: she was glad that her hair was still brightly abundant, her skin fair and dimpled, her teeth white and unbroken: she saw she was beautiful, and rejoiced, and the pleasure in her breast heightened

her beauty ; but it was all for Bolton's sake ; and yet her heart told her truly he would love her even when her bloom departed.

The rector and his guest set forth together, but parted presently ; she to gain the cliffs, he the Manor-house.

And Constance, treading once more the steep pathway across the short, sweet herbage, each step renewing old dreams of delight, reached the tumulus at the top, near which rested the bones of the Protestant knight — Sir Giles Lance.

Beneath, lay the summer sea ; above, the cloudless sky. The valley smiled amidst its odorous hayfields, and far off inland the haze which betokens coming heat, obscured the distant landmarks. The scenes which for nearly twenty years had been seen by her only in dreams—which had been to her what the vision of the promised land was to Moses—were before her. The pure air, to breathe which again she had often longed with sickening longing in her sheltered glades at home, the aromatic scent from the samphire, the cry of the sea-birds, the dash of the waves, the distant sails were around her once more. She sat down, exhausted with the fulness of her content ; overcome with the joy of her heart. She recalled her past life : how short those past years seemed now ! how little her trials, how faulty her conduct ! She had thought evil of the author of her being ; she had violated her marriage vows. Surely she was unworthy of all she yet hoped to receive.

Suppose—ah, this summer sea could lash itself into deadly fury ; this scented breeze could howl and shriek destruction—suppose he never returned to hear her penitent story ; or suppose—and Nelly's remark suggested this—he had found some one who would be to him all, and more than all, she could have been. She spurned

the unworthy idea. No other could love as she loved ; but she would offer him his freedom still. Her youth was over, her merry temper subdued : she had better offer him her friendship only. He should be but a dear long-lost brother, and when age and infirmities advanced, she would cheer his declining days with sisterly affection and care.

As she thus determined, a cloud seemed to come between her and the sun's warmth. She drew her shawl closer round her : surely a chillness was rising from the waters ? No : the lovely sky was all aglow, the sea was unruffled—the chill was at her heart ; peace and beauty reigned around ; nature was offering her evening incense to her beneficent Maker. She gazed around, and drank in the universal harmony : ocean, earth, and air were steeped in beauty.

Shading her eyes with her hand, she looked along the well-known path, which, skirting the edge of the cliff, led to the gate of the Manor plantations. How she longed to be able to dash through that shady opening and behold the old house again ! As she looked, some one opened the little wicket and came through. At first it was impossible to see it was not John Craven, but as he approached with swift and somewhat rolling steps, the distinction was easily made. He was a powerfully built man in the very prime of life, his skin was bronzed with the fierce suns of other hemispheres than ours, his clothes were of uncouth cut, his hair was slightly grizzled, and there were a few lines on the broad forehead from which his hat was pushed ; but in the well-shaped nose and mouth, in the kindly gleam of the bright blue eyes, there remained enough of the beauty of his youth to make recognition instant. She knew him before he reached her side—the rustle of the grass

beneath his hasty tread rang peals of welcome in her ears. She started to her feet, and stood with clasped hands and straining eyes as he drew nearer. Soul to soul looked from their eager faces. At last they were together !

“Constance ! my wife !”

“My own husband !”

She saw him again only as the lover of her girlhood, the bright sailor boy, the merry companion of her happy youth. Where was her humility?—where her desire to live with him only as his faithful sister ?

Time ceased to be ; years fell from them both ; youth returned with the summer of nature, the spicy air—the caressing breeze—the lark’s glad song. Where was Platonic affection—where the sober manner befitting their sober years, as his kisses fell on her unaverted lips, and as her lips rapturously repaid his ?

Not until the sun had sunk, and the voices of the villagers round their cottage doors rang up in the still evening air, did Bolton and Constance recollect they were not the sole inhabitants of earth ; then, as they thought them of those awaiting them, they turned to go, but again paused to look on the familiar scene.

The valley was already shadowed in twilight, and the lazy smoke from its hamlets rose like the Jewish sacrifice of old ; the wild heath country lay darkly purple under the eastern sky, and the dewy air was faint with the fragrant “meadow sweet.” But who can describe the loveliness of an evening in early summer ? who can analyse the subtle influence that floats in the perfumed breeze and lurks in the gloaming, that calls forth our holiest wishes, that opens our best thoughts ? who can tune that voiceless melody that chimes in our hearts, that vibrates through our souls ? who can explain why our

spirits struggle to be free, to be elsewhere? who can experience all this, and deny their immortal origin? The soul is imprisoned, through sin, for a brief period, but it never ceases to struggle and to assert its independence; and if we will but listen, is ever plainly reminding us that we are but "pilgrims" and sojourners in a strange land.

They looked last upon the sea; Bolton's arm embracing her, her radiant face resting on his breast.

For a few moments after the glow had faded from the sun's retreating glory, the gray twilight brooded upon the face of the waters. Then the full moon rose swiftly and majestically from behind the Island of Portland, flinging a broad line of liquid silver across the heaving ocean to where they stood. Bolton's face was bathed in the heavenly light, and Constance applying her uncle's last consoling words, said softly, "*At eventide there is light.*"

THE END.

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